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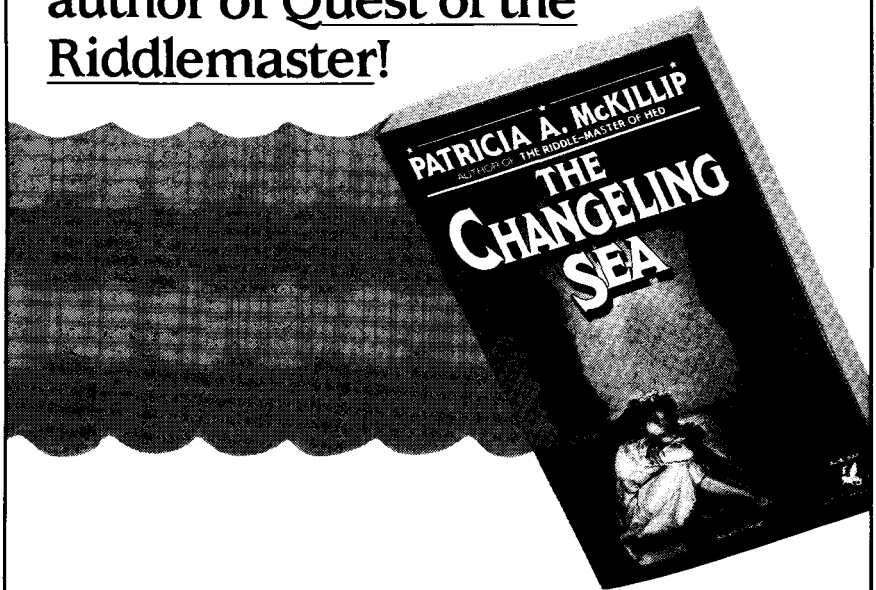

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Rod Garcia made an exciting F&SF debut with "Cast on A Distant Shore" (April 1989). His new story — a historical "hard" fantasy set in the Scots border country during the winter of 1569 — is equally impressive.

THE AULD RELIGION

By R. Garcia y Robertson

Now Liddesdale has ridden a ride
But I ken they had better have stayed home,
For Michael of Winfield, he is dead
And a prisoner taken is Jock o' the Syde.
— The Ballad of Jock Armstrong of the Syde

Liddesdale

COUNTESS ANNE OF Northumberland knew they were nearing Scotland when she saw a wolf herding sheep. These were English sheep, no error there, for Anne had followed the flock through the thorn and heather of Brecastle Waste wondering, who would be driving sheep in the dead of winter? She expected to see border reivers, Liddesdale riders in blackened armor, but instead saw a grinning wolf with yellow eyes. He ran back and forth

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behind the flock, growling warnings and nipping at the strays as if he were born to the task. Anne shivered. Scotland must be bleak indeed, if even the wolves came into England to steal.

Her mare shied, snorting and trying to back off. Anne leaned forward, patting the mare's neck, saying silly things to calm the tired animal. "You shall sleep in hay tonight instead of straw. You shall eat oats off a silver plate, and share my feather bed."

A month before, Anne had owned fifty feather beds in a dozen manors. She had owned linen to fit the fifty beds, and table service for two hundred. That month she had ridden south into Yorkshire, one among thousands: lords and ladies, knights and tenants, smiths, shepherds, plowmen and priests; the whole of the north country rising as one for the Old Religion, bearing the banner of the three Marys: the Mary that lived, the Mary that was dead, and the Mary that was the Mother of God.

Now Anne was riding north on a horse as weary as she was. The cheering had ceased, and the thousands had shrunk to forty faithful riders in dented armor, trotting after her and her husband. She was exhausted of riding, mortally sick of being on a horse. Anne discovered that riding in retreat was more tiring than riding in an advance, and there was no end to retreat; the roads just got worse. They had left the High Road at Newcastle, where Old John Forster, warden of the Middle March, had barred the gates against them. They followed the frozen tracks that led up the Tyne and along the line of Hadrian's Wall. Now, nearly to Scotland, Anne could see no road at all: just moor, heath grass, and bare sod, cut by steep gullies and sprinkled with snow. To the north the tangled mass of the Cheviot Hills blocked their flight, forcing the fugitives westward toward the Scots border.

Ahead Anne saw the sheep stop and stand bleating on the bank of a stream until the wolf forced them in. Then they slid down the bank, splashing through the thin ice, scrambling up the far bank and milling about, shaking themselves dry. A devilish-looking horseman in black leather and Scots bonnet appeared in the dusk on the far shore. Anne thought, This man is deliberately showing himself, silhouetting himself and his horse against the setting sun. The wolf drove the flock straight for the man, the sheep parting to pass on either side of his horse. If the lone horseman was awaiting the sheep, he did not seem surprised to see forty desperate riders following after the stolen flock.

Stopping at the stream, Anne saw the rider was a big-bearded Scot. A

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long lance hung across his back, a short-barreled hackbut swung from his saddle, two heavy pistols were thrust into his boot tops, and he wore a wicked-looking dirk in his belt — all sure signs that the fellow had made more enemies than friends. The thin rapier slung over his shoulder seemed redundant, but she supposed it was meant to show he was a gentleman. She was learning where not to place her trust, and Anne distrusted this Scot even from a distance.

Tom, her husband, and Charles Neville of Westmorland rode down into the stream and up the far bank. Two armed and armored Englishmen should match a single Scot, no matter how many weapons he had loaded on himself. Anne prodded her horse right to the icy bank, where she could hear without crossing over.

The dark stranger spoke with a trotting Scots cadence, and Anne strained to catch the words. "I am the laird o' Wormistoun, come to welcome Yer Lairdschips to Scotland."

"You know us?" Tom always took time adjusting to the unexpected.

"There be na much that does na come to me. I heard that two Inglis earls, o' Noorthumberland and Westmoorland, war coming wi' twoscore riders. If ye are na them, then who else would ye be?"

"What do you want with these earls?" Her Tom Percy, the seventh earl of Northumberland, was still pretending to be someone else.

"I am here to receive ye into Scotland, offering plain food and a poor roof."

"Out of love for English earls?" Neville, the earl of Westmorland, was even less trusting than Tom.

"Out o' respeket for fellow outlaws."

"I can easily believe you are an outlaw," said Westmorland, "but what was your crime?"

A gap-toothed grin appeared above the man's bushy beard. "Regicide wa' the charge, but it wa' na fouled."

"What was that last?" asked Tom.

"He is claiming innocence," said Westmorland, "not too convincingly."

The two earls turned back across the stream to talk things over with Anne on the English side. Westmorland was first with an opinion. "There was a Teviotdale outlaw, Lord Ormiston, among Bothwell's men. The king he is accused of killing must be Lord Darnley — merely Mary's husband, and not much of a king."

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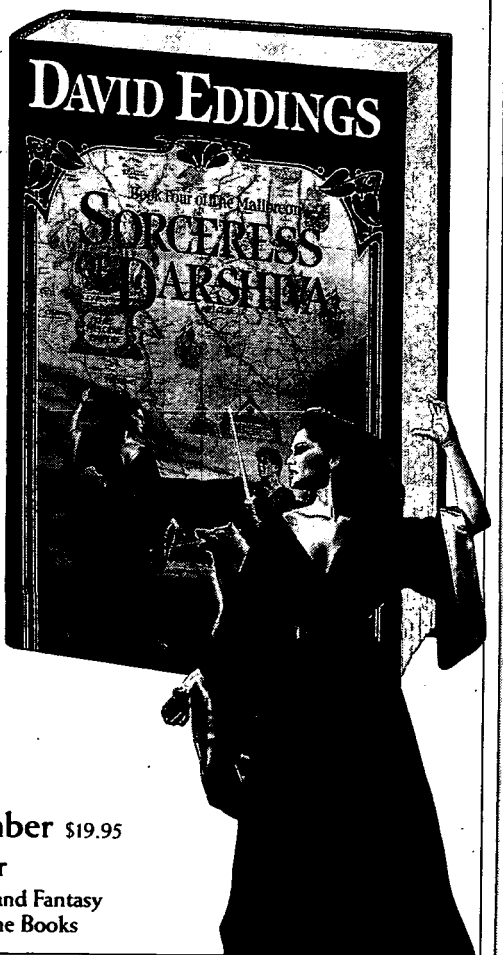

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Anne could see her Tom torn between the fear of pursuit and the expectation of treachery. Both had become as common as bread and breathing. Tom's own brother, Henry, had already betrayed them; Anne imagined that Elizabeth had offered Henry the earldom. Her husband said, "I do not care how many kings or small dogs he killed in Scotland. Has he slit any English throats of late?"

"Probably," said Westmorland, "but we dare not deal with honest men. It is him or lay our heads under a hedge. If he is Mary's man, he may help us for love of her. He will no doubt treat us better than blood relations, since we must be worth more than all his kin combined."

"Which is why he will shop us to Scrope or Sussex," said Tom. "Such men as him love nothing so much as themselves." Tom turned to Anne in bewildered anguish.

"I do not like him, either," said Anne, "but I am learning of late that I cannot always have what I like. Last night we were turned away by a traitor. Tonight I am willing to sleep under a murderer's roof if it keeps me tolerably dry."

The night before, they had been at Naworth, begging shelter from Tom's cousin, Crookback Darce, who had first bullied Tom into revolt. They came as Darce was readying to ride out to help Lord Scrope hunt for them. That awkward scene ended with Darce turning them away. Betrayal no longer surprised Anne, since by now she was familiar with all its forms. She knew why the poor tenant deserted the march, and why the great lord turned his coat. Darce had rebelled for gain, and since he was manifestly not gaining by their cause, he made his peace with Elizabeth.

Anne told herself that she had rebelled on principle, and those who rose on principle got no peace offers from Elizabeth. Anne knew the queen rather well, though no one would count them close. Like her sister and father before her, Elizabeth had only two remedies for principled heads: the rope and the ax.

"Right now we are forty to this man's one," Westmorland reminded them. "If he betrays us, we can take some consolation in killing him."

In the end, they followed him, as Anne knew they must. When Westmorland questioned their destination, Ormiston just said, "Follow the sheep."

Crossing onto foreign soil, Anne did not feel she was leaving home. Home was long gone. Her stately houses, her acres of plowland and pasture, her woods, her gowns and gloves, the keepsakes from her childhood —

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even her pebbles from the Via Dolorosa — were all lost for good. She did not think that borders would protect her. Scots soil was not magic. To her, the border seemed merely a small stream.

Anne found Ormiston as friendly and personal as the French pox. The villain talked on to her in his lilting Scots accent — mostly about his own exploits, which consisted of riding, stealing, and taking keen revenge for slight cause. She discovered the scoundrel could not carry on a quarter hour's conversation without convicting himself of a dozen offenses against man or God. The Scot assured her that he abhorred unnecessary homicide, but found a multitude of occasions for necessary murder.

She was provoked to ask Ormiston if he had really killed Lord Darnley, Mary's consort and Ormiston's nominal liege.

"Darnley war vain and vicious," Ormiston said with a shake of the head. "He braked in on the queen at Holyrood and murdered her musical master merely for spite. Poor Mary, young and wi' child, war made to watch."

Anne had already heard some of the horror of Mary's few years in Scotland, and offered her sanctuary when the young woman fled south. Elizabeth had snatched the supplicant up and imprisoned hardly help her for the crime of being the queen's closest kin. Anne knew the queen could hardly help herself. Elizabeth had been declared a bastard by her father, who beheaded her mother and stepmother. Mary would have found more family feeling in a pit viper.

Ormiston made a show of concern for Mary, then went on with his story. "While Darnley lay sick a bed in Kirk o' Field, someone filled the cellars wi' black powder, na wanting to dirty thar hands wi' killing. Only Darnley wa' a demon. Kirk o' Field blew itself halfway to heaven, but Darnley wa' na scratched an' still in need o' strangling. He had been a petulant fool, suffering from a plague of enemies, and war never a well man, besides. His death was as natural as old age, but people accused me o' lending a hand, as any man might."

"Oh," said Anne, and she rode on in silence.

"Lending a hand?" asked Tom.

"Wi' the strangling," said Ormiston. "It war na my feud, but it be a custom as old as the pines to throttle a poor king when the queen's bed needs new blood. Earl Bothwell had his bonnet set on Mary, and took a dislike to Darnley, which war na hard. Everyone knew how ready I am to help out an earl in need." He smiled at the earl of Westmorland, as though

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the murder charge were a sign of his good faith to them.

"What a perfectly appalling country," said Westmorland.

"England is no better now," said Anne, "or else why are we leaving?" She took a long breath, feeling the raw December air in her throat. In three days, it would be Christmas. She wanted to enjoy each breath, each free heartbeat. Let me have Christmas, she thought. She did not know how long it would be before she sat in a stone cell, nor how long her neck would be working.

The sheep bleated louder. Anne realized the wolf was driving them into a fold. Ormiston sang out that they should beware of the stone pen. She edged her tired mount toward his voice. Ahead she could see the solid blackness of a low hovel, its mud-and-stick chimney looming against the sky like a giant swallow's nest. She wondered why they were riding through some poor crofter's barnyard, until Ormiston called a halt. Anne realized this was the night's lodging.

"Sleep here?" said Westmorland. "No Englishman would kennel dogs in this."

"Perhaps an Inglisman would na, but we Scots are keen lovers o' canines. We would na let even an Inglis dog sleep in the snow."

Anne dismounted, not worried that Westmorland would see her smiling in the darkness. She was happy to be off her horse, happy to have a place to sleep. A heavy door swung open, and firelight spilled out. Anne was greeted by a woman, gray and old as death, who might have been Ormiston's mother, grandmother, or aged tenant. Beneath the woman's wool shawl. Anne saw a face as wrinkled as a bud in winter, which must have been beautiful when young. She motioned for Anne to follow after her, giving no more than a look and a sniff to the two English earls.

The hut was small, thick with closed-in warmth, woodsmoke, and animal smells. The old woman kept talking in a kindly way, with an accent so strong and ancient that Anne could not understand a word. Ormiston had to translate. Through him the crone offered her the only bed, a mattress stuffed with straw and shoved in a corner.

Exhausted, she strove to sleep, but Countess Anne still found it strange to lie down fully clothed with men going in and out. Ormiston left to tally the stolen sheep, then Tom went to see to his retainers outside. Every time the door opened, she could hear bleating sheep, restless horses, and boots tramping about.

Ormiston returned, saying the wolf had done well: "A nice night's profit is in the pen."

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"Do not let the wolf in here," Westmorland yelled out. "The place smells badly of dog already."

"Why na? This wolf be family here, earnin' his keep better than half my relations."

Anne opened her eyes, but, in place of the wolf, Ormiston brought a stranger: a dark, slender man of middle height, with a dagger-sharp beard and a swing to his step, legs slightly bowed like a horseman. A handsome fur-trimmed jacket hung from one shoulder. Here was another villain to be wary of, with deep-set eyes that looked her over, as frankly as she studied him. His rude stare was disturbing. How long did it take him to see that she was a woman, clearly indisposed? By way of introduction, Ormiston sang out to Westmorland:

He's well kenned, Jock o' the Syde
A better robber ner did ride.

THE MAN did not blink at being called a thief. He wore a blue-and-white ribbon in his bonnet, and Anne recognized Armstrong colors, the worst riding family among the Liddesdale Scots. She closed her eyes. Let the men deal with him. Her husband and forty armed horsemen were within Westmorland's call, and what more safety could she expect? She slept.

Anne woke in the Hour of the Wolf, well toward dawn. Gray light came through the chinks in the door, and the fire had sunk to embers. A single candle lit the room, resting on the plank table. The men had removed their armor — breastplates, backplates, and crested morions lay piled by the door. Tom was hovering over her, his hand on her shoulder. Ormiston was gone again. The remaining men seemed to stare at her.

"Anne," said her husband, "we need your help."

She nodded, too sleepy to speak or question.

"This old granny" — Tom indicated the crone of the cottage —"claims to be a seeress. She is willing to cast our fortunes, but only if a woman will turn the cards."

Shock roused her. "Tom, ours is a holy cause; how can we do anything now that is against God?"

He took her hands and held them tight. "Anne, it is so hard to know what to do, or whom to trust. I do not ask for any unholy help. I want only some

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white magic, a dip into the future as far as this crone can see; but she wants a woman, a woman of our party. You are the only one."

Anne smoothed the wrinkles from her gown. Now it had come. Marching south, she had put herself in God's hands, asking Mary to guide her steps. She threw aside safety and security, knowing that Christ could overcome impossible odds. During the whole horrible retreat, she had felt God's hand lifting, heard Mary's voice receding, leaving her to wander aimlessly with nothing but body and soul. The queen's men could steal her body, but only she could give up her soul.

In her husband's worn face, she no longer saw the plain, straight man they called "Simple Tom." He looked over fifty, aged ten years by the burden of betrayal. She could not say no to such agony. "Thomas, to be by your side, I have given up my home, my estates, my standing in the world; lending my hand to witchcraft will be the last I can do."

"Just this," he said. "I would not ask more."

Anne wondered how the man could ask less. Even white magic was a deal with the Devil. Sitting down at the table, she saw the dark gaps between the table planks as crevices into damnation. Jock o' the Syde sat uncomfortably close to her elbow, looking like Lucifer's poor relation. Scotland was not only famous for foul weather and thin beer, but was also known to be thick with witches. Preachers from the south swore that northern nights were filled with thousands of women riding about on brooms and goats, having intercourse with Satan and blighting their neighbor's pigs. Anne had grown up with these stories, but had never desired to test them.

The crone reached out and took her hands, cooing in that weird tongue. Anne could feel frail bones in the long fingers, through the parchment skin. The hands had once been shapely, but now were a web of veins and wrinkles. Here was a living mirror. If she lived, it would only be to become as old and wrinkled, and as close to death, as this woman. Anne did not feel sad. Defeat had pressed the sadness out of her. She was just desperate to face death with a clear heart. When the end comes, she must say she had done no evil. Could Elizabeth claim the same?

Jock o' the Syde spoke to her, sounding rough and low as he looked. "This be my granny, the youngest daughter to a line of youngest daughters for as far back as memory runs. She calls on the fates wi' cards."

"But will they answer?" Westmorland was standing by the burned-over

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fire, looking down his long nose at them. Anne was weary of Westmorland's cynicism. If Neville thought this was nothing, let him turn the cards.

"O' course the Norns will answer," said Jock. "They are three auld women, too ugly for fornication, wi' only one eye between 'em. They got na better to do but answer." He said some fast words to the old woman that Anne could not follow. The crone gave a slight nod, not taking her gaze off Anne, as though the man's words were of no concern. I am in her hands, thought Anne, and my soul is all she wants.

Jock leaned back. "To show there is na chicanery, we will start wi' yer past, which is plain to everyone, an' can be judged by all."

Wrinkled hands drew Anne's over to the cards, spread in three long facedown rows. The old woman indicated that Anne should chose a card from the first row. Anne felt over the line of blank paper rectangles, edges and backs worn from many readings. A card tugged at her fingers. She turned it over and revealed:

A tall tower blasted by lightning, afire and breaking in two, toppling two people and a crown toward distant ground.

She watched Tom flinch, and even Westmorland wince, at the painted image. The crone's hands held her steady.

"*La Maison de Dieu*: overthrow, defeat, an' disaster," said Jock cheerfully. "That is yer past, all right, but it is na all bad. Ground must be cleared for new planting."

"Spare us the philosophy," said Westmorland. "I doubt that you have ever planted anything more fertile than a dagger."

"True, I am na a plowman," said Jock. "My holdings are in sheep an' kine."

"Yours or your neighbor's?"

"We would na be neighbors if ye Inglis did na keep coming north."

The crone directed Anne's hands to the next line of cards, still unconcerned by what the men said.

"Here is what is," said Jock o' the Syde.

This time, it was harder. Several cards pulled at her. One pulled more than the others, so she turned it over:

A man borne down by a bundle of ten staves, walking toward a house, woods, and field.

This image was not as obvious. She looked at Jock o' the Syde. He spoke low and directly to her. "Ten o' Wands means ye carry a burden —

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problems to be met — with yer goal still a ways off."

He looked at the two earls. "The card also hides a traitor and deceiver."

"We need no cards to know that," said Westmorland. "Traitors are shopping themselves cheap this Christmas season."

"Ye seem to agree wi' what the cards say about past an' present. Are ye ready for yer future?"

The men nodded. Anne ran her hands over the final row of cards. She could see Tom leaning forward, watching as she touched each card in turn. They all felt cold. She looked across at the crone. The old woman began to coo again, rocking back and forth as she sang. For all Anne knew, it was some Scots lullaby.

"Why was she doing this? She did not think the witchcraft would work, and wanted no part of it if it did. Feeling only frustration, she flipped over a final card:

A farmer leaned on a hoe, beside a bush with six coins blossoming on its branches. A seventh coin lay at the farmer's feet.

"There is a rich card," said Westmorland. Tom, too, seemed relieved not to see more death and disaster.

"Yes," said Jock o' the Syde, looking at Anne as he spoke, "there is success in the Seven o' Coins, but only for those willing to work hard and to grow. Na will come o' impatience except imprudent actions."

Anne felt drained. She had soiled herself and her faith. She saw no success in her future, and wanted nothing except to sleep again.

Shots, yells, and the pounding of hooves jerked her alert. Tom and Westmorland seized their weapons. Her husband drew his rapier and flung open the door. Westmorland whipped a pistol out from under his jacket, cocked it, and aimed it at Jock o' the Syde. The Scotsman made no move for the dirk in his belt. He seemed neither surprised nor disturbed by the noise and confusion.

Through the open door, Anne saw her husband's retainers running about beneath black trees, gaunt limbs, and gray sky. Ormiston came to the door, shaking his head, saying without entering, "Liddesdale lads have run off wi' yer mounts."

"Who would dare?" asked Westmorland.

Ormiston cocked his head toward Jock. "Ask the Armstrang. Him an' his kin run the stock in West Liddesdale. I be a Teviotdale thief myself."

Jock drew his dirk slowly, leaned back, and began cleaning under his

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nails with the blade. Anne noticed for the first time that his fingers were long like the crone's, his nails unnaturally sharp. "How were yer horses tethered?" asked the stock thief, showing mild professional interest.

"I ordered them picketed to a rope stretched between pins," said Tom. "And I put a double guard on the pins, with a sentry pacing the length of the rope."

Jock shook his head. "In Liddesdale such careless picketing is like letting a horse run loose. Go see how our mounts are tethered. Each beast is roped to an iron stake as thick as yer thumb, an' driven deep in the ground. Then the horse is hobbled crossways, right foreleg to left hind leg. That is how to picket a horse in these parts, unless yer plan to sleep in the saddle — an' I have heard o' mounts stolen from under heavy sleepers."

A shamefaced young captain came in to report that the picket line had been cut and the horses stampeded.

"'Tis a sorry thing to have happen to guests," said Jock. "An' I admit it war most likely Armstrangs, if it war na Nixons nor Elliots. On the morrow I will speak wi' my kin, to see if yer mounts can be found. Lifting stock is in our blood, an' half the horses in the Dale would na recognize their legal owners." He did not put down his dirk until Westmorland uncocked his gun.

Countess Anne thought of the promises she had made her poor, tired mare, then lay back on the mattress, feeling forgotten because she was not a missing horse. She fell asleep listening to the men argue over long-gone mounts.

Her second waking was in full daylight, hearing horses stamping and snorting outside. She thought Jock had been astonishingly good to his word, to get all their horses back so soon. Anxious to see her mare, she brushed off her dress and stumbled to the door. Instead of their horses, she saw over a hundred Scots mounted on the small, active border horses called hobbies. They were clearly Liddesdale riders, wearing crested morions or plain bowl helmets, with loose quilted jackets and large leather boots. Each had a lance, supplemented by whatever weapons the man could muster: swords, calivers, horse pistols, and ugly Jedburgh axes. In the cold morning sun, they looked to Anne exceedingly cruel.

Her husband's men stood in a ragged ring around their earls, all afoot and badly outnumbered.

The leader of the horsemen introduced himself as Martin Elliot of Braidley.

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He spoke to Ormiston, rather than to the earls, announcing that the Privy Council of Scotland was denying refuge to the northern rebels. "I do na want to enter feud wi' ye, but these Inglis lairds must be gone from Scotland before dusk on the morrow, and na more Inglis may cross the border. Ye ken who I speak for?"

"This man is a cousin of mine," she heard Jock say, "and I would just as well na kill him. Most days he kens his manners as well as any Elliot may, but he is under pledge to the earl o' Moray."

"It war useless to fight," said Ormiston. "Na when the Elliots have Regent Moray's men behind them." Anne heard the thief speak for them, telling the Elliots that they accepted the terms. Martin of Braidley tipped his morion to Jock; then he and his riders turned and rode back up the Dale, lifting their lances like men proud of a brisk morning's work.

When the Elliot pennants fluttered out of sight, Ormiston began to amend his agreement with them. "It would be better to get yer into the 'Bataeable Land before sundown."

"The Debatable Land is still Scotland," said Tom.

"Aye," said Ormiston, "it is Scots in name, but Regent Moray himself must come for us there. The Elliots will make a morning trot down the Dale for Moray, but they will na risk a lang ride among soo many Armstrangs and Grahams."

"And Moray hates us?" asked Anne. Though she had been in Scotland only a night, Anne was not surprised to hear she already had powerful enemies in the land.

"Earl Moray hates ye because yer for Mary," said Jock. "The bastard's Mary's half brother, an' can na forget nor forgive that the thickness o' a blanket bars him from the throne. Nor is Moray like to forgive Mary for chasing him out o' Scotland wi' a steel bonnet on her head an' a pistol on her hip."

"And when Moray comes down to the Debatable Land, what then?" asked Westmorland.

Ormiston smiled. "Lad, it be plain that ye do na ken what a sore trouble it be governing over Scots. Moray has visited these borders twice this year: burning, hanging, and getting pledges o' good behavior from Martin o' Braidley and such like. Now look: two months after his last ride through, an' new problems require his return. He can na keep running to this corner o' Scotland. The land has other hot corners to worry Earl Moray.

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The regent is na a well man, an' na fit to spend perhaps his last Christmas shooing off Inglis earls."

"Moray is ill?" asked Westmorland, his telling Anne and everyone that he did not wish the invalid well.

Ormiston smiled. "The earl o' Moray suffers from Darnley's disease — a vain disposition and a suffet o' enemies that may yet prove fatal. We can have a snug Christmas with Hector Armstrang o' Harlow."

Anne's heart sank, seeing her husband excited. He turned to her: "I know this Hector of Harlow. I saved him from hanging when he was caught in a hot trod. We can sit out Christmas at least with him." She saw him grasping at this new destination, like a drowning man grabbing splinters.

"No," said Anne, "I will not go another league."

Tom looked surprised and puzzled. Jock and Ormiston seemed amused. Westmorland wore the smile we save for when someone says something unexpectedly insane. She took her husband's hands to stop her own from trembling with cold and doubt. "We are fleeing to nowhere. Without Our Maker's Grace, we have nothing even if we win free."

"I know we are nothing without Him," said Tom, "but I had hoped to save a little something."

"It is hope that hangs a man who would otherwise die fighting." She compressed his fingers as hard as she could. "We put ourselves in God's hands, then slipped through His fingers. I do not know why, but God let our cause fail. We cannot run from that, even if we fled to the Far Indies."

He gave her his simplest stubborn look. "I must take this chance. The Ferniehurst Kerrs, the Johnstones, and Maxwell of Herries — all fought for Mary at Langside. I might bring together Mary's men on both sides of the border."

Ormiston came to Tom's elbow. "The West March will rise for Maxwell. The Kerr o' Cessford is Moray's warden in the Middle March, and at feud wi' his Ferniehurst cousins; so Ferniehurst is ready for any ride that will do Cessford ill."

It was plain that Tom was lost in plotting with Ormiston. Anne assumed that half the ruffians on the borders were always ready to ride against the other half out of greed or boredom. She did not need to know the names. "You can go," she said, "but I cannot run anymore. I want to find out what God has waiting for me."

Tom looked pained at her. She pulled him toward Jock of the Syde, saying, "Come, we can ask this Armstrong if I may stay a day or so." She

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did not expect it would take longer than that for pursuit to find her.

She found Jock of the Syde telling Westmorland that he could not go into the Debatable Land wearing silk hose and a black Spanish doublet. The earl looked down at his fashionable puffed and slashed sleeves. "I would not think a Scot could criticize my dress."

"Wi' all that silk and a gold-mounted sword, ye might better be dressed in a placard saying, 'fugitive Inglis laird,' considering how few o' us Armstrangs ken letters."

Westmorland looked suspicious. "I would think that more of your relatives in the Debatable Land are wanted by English wardens themselves."

"That they are, and there is na a rat's respeket for Inglis law among the lot o'em; but when the reward is high enough, the best o'em will turn honest wi'out warning. Some men have na pride when a silver shilling is put in thar palm."

Westmorland began to strip off his hose and doublet, while Jock did the same. Anne realized the stock thief had planned this trade in advance, since he was wearing a rough sheepskin coat instead of his fine jacket trimmed with wolf fur.

Anned turned her back on the disrobing, and Tom asked, "Would you swear it was safe if I left my wife here, until I could send for her? Would the Elliots harm her?"

Jock swore, "The Elliots would na touch her. They live up the Dale, close by the Hermitage, and ken what a lady is. We are the wild ones, living down here so near to the Inglis. She would be as safe as a hundred stone statues o' Saint Bernard." He called to her, to make the invitation personal. "Na Scot's gentleman could think o' turning a lady away." She inclined her head to thank the Scot, thinking his courtesy could have been more courtly had he not been half bare and half in Westmorland's hose.

"Send for me when you can," she told Tom. "I have silver to pay for my stay." She spoke as warmly as she was able, expecting that these were the last words between them. He kissed her and told her he would send for her by Christmas. "I will try to find us a safe hole for the winter, where we can celebrate Christ's Mass in a real church."

Anne did not want a hole for the winter, but knew it was useless to say so; instead, she watched the small parade march off. Only Ormiston was mounted. Many of the retainers had discarded their armor and trailed their lances. She tried to fix her husband's image in her mind, to have a memory

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to return to. Tom looked strong, striding ahead, still fearless in retreat.

When he was beyond sight, she thought: This cord is cut; live or die, I have only God to help me. Through sleepy eyes, she took her first long look at Liddesdale. By day the Dale did not seem the bleak and brutal place the ballads sang about. A light powdering of snow topped bare limbs and rumpled hills. She thought that Scotland might be beautiful, were it not for the cold, the accommodations, and the natives.

She found her host seated on a stump, still struggling with Westmorland's Spanish doublet, which was small on him. He offered her the pick of the sheep in the pen for breakfast, with the happy generosity of a bandit giving away another man's mutton. She hesitated, and he added, "If ye will na eat stolen stock in the Dale, then ye should be prepared to fast."

Anne declined, not because the sheep were stolen, but because she was in no mood to butcher a lamb. Two days short of Christmas was a fine day for purging her body and reclaiming her soul.

She watched Jock admire his new hose and doublet, preening himself like a male bird in spring. Noting his sure movements and how his thighs bulged under the tight silk, she saw a man who might be impossible to handle, with only an ancient crone for chaperon. Considering how neatly he had stripped Westmorland, Anne decided to set a proper tone by asking, "Is there a church nearby?"

"A kirk?" Jock make it sound as if she wanted fresh apple blossoms for her Christmas wreath.

"Yes, for the Christians in the Dale."

"Christians? Na, we be mainly Armstrangs and Elliots here. There be na a kirk near about." He waved at the white hills. "In the shielings, there is a small shrine of the Virgin Mary that the shepherds use in summer."

"Where are these shielings?" she asked.

"There," Jock pointed. "Just over that bare crest that catches the light."

The winter sun made the air sparkle, and Anne saw the spot where sunlight spilled along the ridge, looking bright against the frowning mass of the Cheviots. "I want to walk there."

"It is na walk for a lady, even in summer, and this war winter, as Yer Ladyschip may have noticed."

She looked down at her travel-worn gown. "Then I will not walk as a lady. Can your granny find suitable outfit for me to walk in?"

Jock said something incomprehensible to the crone, and Anne followed

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her into the cottage, where the old woman produced a homespun smock and rough leather boots. The homespun had a hair-shirt roughness against her skin, and Anne welcomed that part penance. The boots felt strong and sturdy. She emerged to find Jock leaning on a bow and wearing his jacket trimmed with wolf fur.

She shook her head. "I am going alone."

"Yer will na find the shrine alone."

"It is Mary's shrine. If she wants me, she shall lead me there." Anne had not bent for queen nor husband, and she would not bow for any border ruffian.

The border ruffian sat back on his stump, letting the bow slip between his knees. "I am na the worst thing yer might meet among the hills and bracken."

"I will risk the worst. Between the queen of England and the regent of Scotland, there is no more safety for me here than there is in the hills."

Anne turned and set off, using the bare crest and patch of sunlight for her compass. After riding so much, it was a wonder just to take long, stretching steps, to walk free and choose her own direction. She counted out a hundred paces, then another hundred, her boots crunching through thin layers of snow. If there was a stone cell waiting for her, she wanted to remember every free step.

At the edge of Jock's pasture, a footpath wound upward, cutting under the bare ridges, skirting the main mass of the Cheviots, bending back toward Bewcastle Waste and the border. Anne decided to follow the path as far as the base of the sunlit ridge. She kept looking to make sure the sheepfold and hovel were in sight.

Halfway up, she started. Two figures came down the footpath toward her, and one was surely male. She hesitated, fearing brigands or sturdy beggars; but then she went on. She was in God's hands, or she was nothing. The two specters acted as wary as she was, becoming a woman in black and a tall lad, both looking weary and carrying bundles on their backs. Seeing the bundles, she knew who they would be, and called out, "Are you English?"

There was a flicker of hope on the woman's worn face. "Yes, we are English. We feared that you were Scots."

Anne wanted to say that she had not found the Scots as horrible as people supposed, but she knew better than to make promises to this woman. Women and boys fleeing the North of England might find the Scots

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every bit as bad as generally imagined. She pointed out the cottage: "Perhaps the old woman there will feed you. I will be back in the afternoon, and will try to find you food and shelter." These were folks who had lost all for having faith in her and Tom. The sight of their suffering was another penance to endure.

When she was level with the ridge, she turned toward the shrine; bracken closed in around her, the heather coming up past her waist, and the roots tripping at her feet. She forded an icy brook that bit at her bare legs, then scrambled up slopes slick with frost and cut by deep gullies. She could no longer see the sunlit crest, just stunted pines and jutting crags overgrown with lichen. She lost her compass and had to go the long way around a patch of bog. Somewhere above her was the shrine, but when she tried to go uphill, huge rocks and head-tall bracken blocked her path. She lost even the sun.

Not wanting to go back, Anne sat on some mossy stones, pulling thorns and burrs from her wool smock, hearing only her own labored breathing. Her fingers were white with cold, their tips torn by frozen stones. In this stillness was a peace of sorts. Clutching her hollow stomach, she imagined Christmas feasts of boiled beef and meat pies, with puddings and cream cakes. She no longer felt like a countess, nor even like a married woman, but like a shamed girl who had run off to hide.

Far off, under the pines, she saw a flickering where lanes of sunlight slanted down into an open space. Anne got to her feet and pushed through the tangle. If she could find the sun, perhaps she could find her bearings. At the edge of the clearing, she stopped. Something was moving, making the branches sway and the sunlight dance. Only fear was holding her back, so she cast it aside and stepped into the light.

The movement came from a half-grown deer struggling in a snare. She was a doe-fawn, hanging from a noose around her neck fixed to a springy sapling that held the deer off the ground. One hind leg had gotten twisted in the rope, keeping her from strangling quickly. The other hind leg hung straight down, straining to reach the ground. Anne could see where the rope had torn the deer's delicate skin. Neck and noose were speckled with blood.

The fawn froze as Anne entered the clearing, hanging motionless for a moment, ribs heaving, head twisted sideways, watching Anne through a big brown eye. Then, in a flurry of limbs, the deer struggled again, free legs kicking at the noose. Her hooves could not cut the rope, and only opened

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While she watched, the doe-fawn turned into a half-grown girl.

more gashes in her neck. As she fluttered and pulled, the sapling bobbed above her, making a hole in the pine canopy and splashing light across the clearing.

Anne ran to catch the deer while she was still struggling. She stood swaying under the deer's weight, feeling a heart beating faster than hers. How to free the animal? Anne realized she had no knife, and she was holding a strong, frightened creature in her arms. Her hands could not hold the deer and undo the noose, nor could she keep supporting the weight. She bowed her head and tore at the bloody knot with her teeth. The fawn stopped struggling and lay heaving in her arms, head next to hers. Anne could feel wet panting on her cheek.

The knot gave, and Anne knelt, laying the deer down on the moss and needles. The animal relaxed, stretching out its neck, doing nothing but breathing. Anne huddled over the hurt creature, feeling useless, wishing she had water to give. No knife, no water to offer, but perhaps she could carry the deer back to the hovel on her shoulders. Anne stood up and looked along the slanting lines of light. The wane sun was already sinking, and would set down the Dale. She could follow it back.

Anne glanced down at the deer, to gauge its weight. The doe looked bigger than before. The white outlines of the animal expanded and altered. Anne froze, frightened but unable to look away from the transformation. While she watched, the doe-fawn turned into a half-grown girl, with big, soft eyes, long, strong limbs, and child's breasts. Wearing only a fawnskin about her waist, the deer-child lay on the brown needles, breathing hard and looking up at Anne. A red ring of torn skin circled her white neck.

The child did not move any more than the deer had, but Anne backed away, awed and terrified. Fear of the unknown and unnatural welled up inside her. What she had done instinctively for a struggling deer was not so easy to do for a human stranger. Anne wanted to help, but was terribly afraid the strangeness would cling to her.

With soft, padding steps, a third body entered the clearing. It was the sheepherding wolf. Across from the half-naked girl, the beast looked coal black — bigger and more menacing than in the night, when Anne had

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been mounted and among armed men. A strong staff would keep off the boldest wolf, but she had not even brought a staff. Too scared to move, she let the beast trot past her, going straight for the girl. With ears pulled back and tail down, the wolf sniffed the blood on the girl's neck, then thrust his muzzle against her jaw. The strange child rose silently on all fours, keeping her chin level with the animal's muzzle, pushing against his snout. She seemed no longer the frightened fawn, but instead, a bitch-cub greeting her littermate.

The wolf backed down, tucking his tail. The girl leaped up onto two legs, and in an instant she was at the edge of the clearing, where she turned and stared at Anne. At that moment the child seemed most human, dropping her animal guises. Anne saw in her only the wildness we expect in children, the wildness of imagination that does not know the confines of adulthood.

"Wait," said Anne, but the girl turned and ran, flicking off between the pines with the giant black wolf at her heels.

But will ye stay till the day go down
Until the night come o'er the ground,
And I'll be a guide worth any roun'
That may in Liddesdale be found.

— Border folk ballad

Adeste Fideles

ANNE KNELT in the silence of the clearing, praying for God's Grace and Mary's guidance, while the sunlight crept away into the pines. The fawn-girl's inhuman beauty made Anne fear for her soul as much as when she had touched the crone's cards. She did not leave the darkening woods until snow began to sift through the black pine boughs wetting her cheek. Then she rose and walked down the Dale, weary and hungry, her hands torn by rocks and thorns.

By the sheepfold she saw a black knot of people huddled with their backs to the stones. She thanked God there were neither horses nor horsemen among them. They were surely English, since Scots seemed to ride everywhere, counting walking a worse crime than horse theft. Closer still, Anne could make out the weary, frightened faces. She recognized the wom-

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an with the tall boy she had met on the footpath. A cooking pot bubbled over a small fire. Some of the bigger and better-dressed men ate bread and meat, while the others watched. No one dared touch the sheep. Jock o' the Syde sat on his stump, wearing Westmorland's sword and toying with his bow, tossing it from hand to hand.

Anne saw a tall white-haired woman tending the fire, working with quiet unconcern, ladling soup into small bowls for the women and children. She had a formidable, slightly long face, and a brisk, even manner. Without having to ask, Anne knew this woman had been a nun, before they closed the convents. Looking into the kettle, Anne saw lumps of lard and dried nettle stalks floating in a barley broth too thin to be called porridge. The thought of children eating such swill sickened her.

Turning to Jock, she said, "This morning you offered me a sheep. I want it now."

Jock shrugged.

Anne went over to the tall woman and told her to pick out a sheep from the pen for the stew. The woman gave a grave nod, and several men leaped over the stones. Anne listened to them argue over which was the fattest, then she heard the bleating from the frightened victim, going on and on until cut short by a knife. Anne did not want to think about killing or about eating. Instead, she thought about a deer transformed into a girl — not a gaunt, terrified girl like these ones desperate for barley broth, but a supernatural child with strong limbs and a wild, proud face. Anne sat down on a stone for a long time, letting nothing intrude on her awe and foreboding, until a sure hand placed a steaming bowl and crust of bread in her lap. Anne savored the smell of boiled meat. With her mouth watering, she tried to push the bowl away.

"No, my lady, we all must eat."

She felt the firm grip of a nun on her shoulder, just as in childhood, bringing the old ways back to her: the smell of incense, processions of priests, white-robed children, the huge and bloody crucifix carried before the image of the Virgin. Anne remembered her own mother bending down to wash the feet of old beggar women. Anne's mother had been a queenly woman, wearing gowns lined with marten's fur, with sleeves so wide that they trailed on the ground; but on Holy Thursday, she poured perfumed water over old women's lame and withered feet. She would rub herbs into the open sores, dry each foot with cloth of gold, and kiss it tenderly. Then

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she would shuffle to the next pair of feet, carrying the heavy silver ewer of warm, scented water.

"How did you know me?" she asked the white-haired nun.

"I saw you several times on the road to York, riding at the head of the march beside your husband and behind the banners."

Anne ate, finding the meat hot and good in her hollow belly; and the bread was English. As she ate, she studied the starved faces of her people, their mouths moving mechanically, too tired to eat and talk at the same time. Jock sat back with a sardonic look on his face. The crone came out of her cottage and gave Anne a wool plaid blanket. She took the blanket, watching the two older women stare at each other, the witch and the nun, neither speaking.

Filling the silence between the women, Anne heard the beat of hooves on the tops, then a clatter of stones, and someone cried out. A small troop of Elliots cantered into the yard, armed with lances, short hackbuts, and long swords; riding with careless agility right through the crowd, scattering people who clung to their soup bowls. She was surrounded by border hobbies, high-topped boots, and leather stirrups. Brutal faces shone above her in the firelight.

Their leader, a crisp young felon with a curled lip, called out to Jock, "Ye war told na to entertain any more Inglis."

Anne looked to Jock for some support, but the Scot only strummed his bow and said, "These are na my guests."

The Elliot glanced at the blood on the stone where the sheep had been butchered. "They are eating yer sheep."

"These are na my sheep," said Jock.

The Elliots laughed. One younger one rode over and tipped the soup kettle with his lance, spilling the mess of meat and nettles over the stones. "Yer all to be gone," announced the leader. "Back to Ingland; yer na wanted in Scotland."

The nun strode over to stand in front of his horse. "Young man, do you call yourself a Christian?"

"Na, I call myself an Elliot."

"Well, these people are Christians, who want only to worship God as they will. For that crime, nooses await them in England. The earl of Sussex has promised to hang hundreds of examples, and has set up gallows to display the queen's vengeance in every village from Redesdale to the sea."

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"Such is na my problem," said the Elliot. "My problem is to get ye out o' Scotland. If ye do na leave, I will kill a few examples o' my own."

Anne stood up. He seemed like a wanton boy, made godlike by a gun and a horse. "It is two days until Christmas; surely you cannot turn us out now."

"Lady Anne," said the Elliot, "I do na mean to discomfort ye. Ye are free to come and go as ye please. Unless some o' them are ladies an' lairds in clever disguise, they must go. As ye said, tomorrow is Christmas Eve. I aim to be drunk by tomorrow night, and be in kirk by Christmas morning, so I must see my work done now."

The wretched people stared wide-eyed at Anne, seeing for the first time a countess in homespun. The woman from the road flung herself at Anne's feet, dragging her son down to his knees beside her. "Our lady, let us stay with you. Lord knows, we are ancient tenants to your husband, holding from him in copyhold, and from his father and his father's father, but now we are utterly beggared. They have hanged my oldest son for wearing your husband's colors. He was a strong and handsome lad, good at Sunday games and at his letters; everyone loved him. Now he is dead. Tell them one is enough from each family. There are so many others they could hang." The woman started sobbing and choking, and stopped making sense, still clinging to Anne's dress. The boy looked scared, too, but also stubbornly resentful. Anne guessed he had spent half his life being compared to his handsome, brainy older brother.

"Lady Anne," said the Elliot. "Tell them to go. I am a man that abhors unnecessary murder, but I have both Inglis and Scots law on my side."

"That must be a passing strange feeling for an Elliot," said Jock.

The Elliot flashed him a smile. "Aye, it almost makes me itch."

The tall nun walked over to the kneeling lad, and took his hand, helping him to his feet. Then she did the same for his mother, prying her fingers off Anne's dress. Her voice was calming and soothing. "Come, we know the way, and it is not a long walk. They cannot hang everyone, and those they do will sup with God." She looked straight at Anne, and started singing the *Adeste Fideles* of Saint Bonaventura.

Anne stood rooted, watching the Elliots prod the others to their feet, pricking them up with the lance points, then pushing them along with the butt ends.

The nun sang louder:

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O come, all ye faithful,
joyful and triumphant;
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem.

As the Elliots escorted the people and their bundles back toward the borders, Anne thought of the deer-child struggling in the snare. Through the fading light, she could see the woman's white head, leading the small procession over the snow with the tall, frightened lad at her side:

O come let us adore him,
O come let us adore him,
O come let us adore him. . . .

She's the bell sheep that leads the others," said Jock.

Anne sat down on his stump. "But this bell sheep is likely to be slaughtered. Those gallows will be for women, too." Elizabeth's Parliament had passed a new and general Witch Law, and nooses for women were again in vogue.

"Da ye na ken the sacrifice?" asked Jock. "It has always been this way in hard times. Them that be called, goes."

Anne put her head between her hands and cried, letting her whole body shake with racking sobs. Jock's arms circled her, but she did not care. She no longer cared about her honor or his touch. All she wanted was to cry until she had vomited up the stew in her stomach and could lie empty in the snow.

She let Jock lead her into the hovel and set her down at the plank table. He poured her a mug of pale gold liquid from a small oak cask. "Here, drink," he said, forcing the wooden mug between her fingers. "'Tis the Water o' Life."

Anne lifted her shaking hands and sipped; it tasted like brandy with more bite, but went down smooth. "I did want to go with them," she said, "but I did not dare."

Jock poured more into her cup. "Drink up, drink up; that is all thar is to do. They will come for ye soon enough. Many's the time I thought of throwing my life away on a point o' honor, but war saved from such arrant stupidity by the wisdom o' Jock Barley Corn."

"Jock Barley Corn?" Anne was unfamiliar with the philosopher.

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"In the cup," said Jock, tapping the mug. "We brew Water o' Life from malted barley. We cut him, flail him, mash him up, an' Jock Barley Corn gives his blood to warm and comfort us."

She stared at the heathen across the table. "It is not the same with me. When we mounted up and rode south, I promised my life to Christ. I was willing to die for the old ways and the Old Religion."

"The Auld Religion," Jock laughed, and the crone cackled with him.

"It may not matter to you, but it matters to many. We wanted to keep the faith we were born and baptized in, and not to have to bow down to a queen of London town."

"Ye do na see me bowing to the regent in Edinburgh, and that is far nearer here than London. Would ye have people getting their religion from Rome?"

She glared at him over her cup. "The bishop of Rome remembers us in his prayers, but, as pope, he will not excommunicate Elizabeth." It was a common charge that the northern rebels were papists, but Rome preferred to deal directly with London.

"What were we to do?" asked Anne, drinking more of Jock Barley's blood. "London sent commissioners to close our convents and abbeys, stripping the silver off the altars and the lead off the roofs. They left us nothing: no nun's gardens of herbs and flowers, no monk's hostels for homeless travelers, no bells to break the night at Prime and Matins. When Mary was made prisoner, we knew things would never be the way they were; then Tom was summoned to London along with Westmorland, to take a cell in the Tower."

"So what did ye do?"

"So we all rose up and marched south with them. Redesdale and Tynedale turned out their riders; Alnwick and Warkworth opened their gates. At Durham Cathedral we burned the new prayer books and sang Mass in the old way. It was a grand thing to see: commons and gentry singing as one, lords and cobblers marching together." She drank more from her mug, watching the firelight dance in the corners, seeing the past flicker before her. "It was spring in November, until we reached Yorkshire and found it a changed place. There were fences and hedges, cutting up the land, and no feeling between lord and tenant. Instead of copyholders and cottagers, there were cotton spinners and laborers working for a wage. We saw empty villages, ruined churches turned to sheepfolds, old forests cut down for

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charcoal, coal mines, and alum plants; and no one came to join us but the beggars on the road."

"So ye turned around and went hame?"

She let him refill her cup.

"Now ye ken what comes o' foolishness. Half of them marching behind ye expected thar would be a new age wi' na lairds, rents, and fines, and everyone being brothers. I ken the way farmers think. But lairds and commons is na alike, else the Elliots would have sent ye hame, too."

"I would have gone with them," said Anne, "but I was afraid."

"O' course ye war afraid. I have come uncommon close to bars and a rope myself, and prayed to heaven above to put another poor sod in my place."

"No, it is not that way. Ever since Yorkshire, I have not felt God's Hand nor heard Mary's voice. I was afraid to die without Grace, with only my sins before me."

"Ye do na seem an overly sinful lass. Did ye na confess at the shrine?"

"I prayed today, but not at the shrine." She looked down into her cup.

"Why war that?" Jock said it with a smile.

Anne would not answer. She was sure this pagan knew all about the demon-child in the wood. Instead of finding the shrine, she had saved a wood demon from snare. Now she was the one snared, for Anne was sure that saving the girl had put her soul on the knife's edge. Good impulses could lead to evil ends. She and Tom rebelled for the best of reasons, and brought ruin on themselves, their families, and anyone faithful to them.

Drinking more of Jock Barley Corn's blood, she thought of Sussex hanging Christians on Christmas. "I will go to the shrine on the morrow." It was not a promise to Jock, but her own vow to the Virgin who awaited her on the ridge.

But word is gane to the laird Scroope,
In Bew Castle where that he lay —
"The deer that ye hae hunted sae lang
Is seen into the Waste this day."

— Border folk ballad

* * *

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Mother's Night

ONE DAY short of Christmas, and Anne awoke late in the morning with a miserable conscience and a worse headache. Finding her homespun dress and linen shift undisturbed, she hoped that Jock Barley Corn and his cousin of the Syde had not gotten the better of her the night before. She wanted only grief to contend with, and not shame as well.

The old granny spooned her some coarse breakfast porridge from an iron pot hanging over the fire. As she ate, Anne remembered Ormiston's promise of plain food and a poor roof. That first promise had been the one the Scot seemed keen to keep. She watched the old woman hang mistletoe and holly over the hearth, and among the herbs in the rafters. Had she not known her as a witch, Anne would have thought the crone was getting ready for Christmas. She had always supposed that witches spent their spare hours stealing corpses or suckling weasels and bats.

When the meal was done, the crone beckoned for Anne to come outside. Anne followed, looking past the spilled soup and bloody show left by last night's meal. Handing Anne an ax, the woman led her to a toppled oak lying in a gully behind the sheepfold, and by signs asked Anne to chop off the dry and gnarled roots. Anne had seldom swung an ax, but she felt obligated to do something in exchange for breakfast. Though the meal had been merely barley, prunes, and a pinch of salt, the crone had shown her hospitality, a prize gift this Christmas. Some of the roots parted at a stroke; other had to be hewed. Working away, she learned to angle the ax stroke, and between swings she looked up at the ridge that hid the shrine.

It took most of the morning to chop a small pile of roots, but the crone seemed content. She bundled them up and disappeared into the hovel, leaving Anne standing alone. Anne leaned against the oak, gauging the distance to the ridge. If she left now, she might be to the shrine and back before dark. Using her new-honed skill, she trimmed an oak branch into a staff before setting out.

As she walked, she noticed that the wolf was behind her — the wolf that herded sheep and ran with demon girls in the woods. She was glad to have her staff. Anne did not expect an attack by the beast, but did not want to be at the wolf's mercy, either. She followed the footpath up to the base of the ridge, and was once more blocked by waist-deep heather and

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gullies full of broken rocks. The deep woods and bleak crags would have been eerie even in summer sunlight; on a darkening winter day, they looked lost and dreary, even though the morrow was Christmas morning.

Anne advanced and retreated, looking for a trail that led to the top, but always being turned about. Several times she took long rests, then began again, determined to reach the one bit of holy ground she knew was in this wilderness.

At dusk she had not given up, and was standing in a small meadow, studying the ridge, trying to see by fading light where the bare expanse came closest to her. Behind her came the clop of hooves, and a familiar voice: "Lady Anne, it be surprising an' pleasing to find ye alone."

She whirled about, and saw Ormiston, looking dirty and tired — every bit the border ruffian, with his beard unkept, his lance across his back, and his raffish boots thrust through rough stirrups.

"Why are you here?" asked Anne. "You were with my husband and Hector of Harlaw."

"Hector Armstrang o' Harlaw is a greedy traitor, grasping and thieving even for an Armstrang. He means to shop yer husband to the earl o' Moray, giving me na a groat's worth o' profit."

"May God have mercy," said Anne.

"Aye, he may," said Ormiston, "but na I hope on Hector o' Harlaw. This tightfisted treason will blacken Harlaw's name. Ye may be sure I will na direct any more valuable fugitives to his door."

Expecting treason did not lessen the shock. Anne stood still, feeling the cold and coming dark, thinking of her husband. Tom was captive, Henry a traitor; her whole family shattered. One by one, everyone she cared for would be hunted out and forced to abjure her or die. She could barely stand such savage sorrow.

Ormiston ran on, though Anne hardly heard him. "The treachery does na stop thar. The Elliots are going to sit tight in thar holes, telling Scrope they will na oppose a Christmas trod. Inglis riders are expected in the Dale by nightfall, looking for me an' ye."

"And you came to warn me?" She was startled, even touched, by the gesture.

Ormiston smiled. "In the depths o' my despair, I thought o' that silver ye mentioned to yer husband when ye parted. If I am to have an ounce of profit out o' my labors, it has to come from the purse ye carry."

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Anne realized she was being robbed by this smooth-talking overarmed brigand. She had never been robbed before. Outraged, she felt stupid and inept in this novel social situation. Her sturdy staff was a thin stick to put against his lance, sword, and brace of pistols. She said something silly and graceless about him not harming a woman.

"Perhaps I would, and perhaps I would na," said Ormiston, "but neither o' us wants to know for sure. So, for both our goods, give me the silver. We canna stand here arguing till Lord Scrope's riders arrive."

In pique and anger, she threw the purse on the ground, then watched the lord of Ormiston spear it with his lance. What did silver matter if Elizabeth's warden was coming tonight, and not even giving her Christmas?

"An' now yer rings."

"Rings?"

"The ones shining on yer fingers," he said, pointing helpfully with his lance.

Standing there, hardly believing his command, she saw the wolf glide out of the pines, his jaws open in a carnivorous grin, showing a fleshy pink tongue and sharp white fangs. Panting in short white puffs, he approached, displaying no special excitement.

Ormiston followed her gaze, and cursed when he saw the wolf. He kicked his horse about, to position himself for a charge, speaking calmly and clearly to the oncoming animal. "Jock, I would have ye keep yer pointed nose out o' my affairs. I did na bring any silver bullets today, but I have the fixings for 'em." He rattled her purse in his belt, and lowered his lance.

The wolf snarled and danced sideways, making Ormiston's hobby shy. Then the wolf ducked under the waving lance and snapped at the horse's heels, driving the hobby like he drove sheep, letting the horseman know he was at the mercy of his mount.

"Stop," screamed Anne, sick with rage, and finding they paid no attention.

Holding his reins with his lance hand, Ormiston clawed at the pistol in his left boot top.

"Stop!" she yelled again, ripping at the metal that circled her fingers, flinging the rings one at a time at the horseman. "There," she screamed at Ormiston, "you took my husband, my horse, my money; why should you men leave me anything?"

Hands bare, she stalked off down the Dale. Before she reached the

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hovel, she heard the wolf padding after her, but did not bother to look back. When she crossed into Scotland, Anne thought she had nothing. In a pair of days, the Scots had neatly shown her that was not the case — stripping her of every valuable she had brought over the border, all with hardly even a harsh word. She had nothing left that was hers but the linen shift she wore under the homespun smock; and aside from that smock, all she had gotten in return was barley porridge, barley blood, and English mutton.

If she could have reached the shrine, that would have been victory enough. Kneeling on sacred ground, she could have made her own peace, the only peace that mattered. Even that had been denied her. If Ormiston had bothered to include an ounce of truth in what he told her, border riders were coming for her that night.

It was dark when she reached the cottage, and Anne could not see the wolf. The crone greeted her with porridge and fresh oat crackers. The warm food had a strong sensual attraction. Ane could not deny her hunger, and fed her body until the bowl was empty. Now there was naught to do but wait for Lord Scrope to come for her.

She started when the door opened. It was not the warden's men, but Jock of the Syde, swaggering in wearing Westmorland's clothes, the fur-trimmed jacket, and a thin smile. She shrank back, remembering how Ormiston had called the wolf "Jock." Now she was certain that the man was a warlock, a shape changer, or loup-garou. His handsome animal attraction was tainted by sorcery. If the old woman were a witch, here was her devil: the black-clothed horseman, booted and spurred, with sword at his side.

"Na need to shy from me," he said, laying his fist on the table. "I have something for ye." He opened his hand, and lying in his palm was her gold wedding ring. "It was na easy task to get this back for ye."

"It must have been hard," said Anne, "running with the ring in your teeth." She made no move to take the ring.

Jock laughed, turning his hand over and spinning the ring on the table. Anne watched it whirl about in a golden circle and then lie still. "That war na the worst of it," said Jock, then he turned his back and started speaking to the crone. Anne took the ring and slipped it on her finger. The familiar metal made her feel more married, even though the Scots and Scrope had taken Tom away.

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Jock poured three mugs of barley blood, and placed one before her. "Ye have heard Ormiston: the Inglis are coming tonight. We Armstrangs are too divided to stop their trod. Hector o' Harlaw has betrayed us, an' many more will wait to see who comes up atop. The Elliots plan to stay drunk in their holds, an' I can hardly blame 'em." He lifted his mug. "If drinking could save us, I would dedicate the night to serious study o' the bottom o' a cup; but drink be a deceiver. We must put our faith in Mother's Night."

Anne did not touch her mug. She knew that heathens celebrated Christmas Eve as Mother's Night, but she had never seen the ritual. She retreated to the straw mattress as the crone lit candles and the bundle of oak roots. Light danced about the room, and she saw Jock kneel before his granny. Anne watched the old woman take salt from a mouse skull and place it on Jock's tongue. The crone's words were still impenetrable, and Anne understood only the parts Jock repeated. They were wild and pagan enough to damn her a hundred times:

Turn the wheel,
winter ta summer;
Turn the wheel,
darkness ta light.
Old Black King ta be
the Bright Child,
Sun be born fram the Womb o' Night.

There was more of it, horribly heretical, making Anne feel all the more lost spending her last free night with nothing to do but listen for Lucifer's footsteps. It was nearly the longest night of the year. Near to morning, Anne tired of waiting for Satan to come dressed as a stinking goat or giant toad. She fell into a fitful sleep.

Again she awoke in the Hour of the Wolf, but this time it was Jock who shook her shoulder. "Listen to the howling in the hills; my cousins say the Inglis are coming."

Anne could hear the long, keen, sorrowful wailing, but the language of the wolves meant nothing to her. She assumed Jock o' the Syde found it more familiar than English. Jock helped her off the bed, then shoved the mattress aside. The crone came over and began to brush furiously at the floor beneath with a broom. It seemed a damned odd time to clean under

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the mattress, even with an English lord expected.

A clatter of hooves came from outside. Anne's fear made it sound like a hundred horses. She heard the yips and yelps of a dog pack as well. To her, dogs spoke plainer than wolves; whoever was coming had come to hunt.

She saw Jock lean down, find a ring hidden in the dirt, and pull back a trap, revealing a raw hole as cozy as an open grave. By the light of the crone's candle, Anne could see it was not just a hole or root cellar, but a timber-braced tunnel, showing more care in its construction than the whole rest of the hovel.

"Neat, is it na?" Jock grinned at her. "This croft has been burned down more times than Armstrangs can count up to, but we have always had this tunnel to build anew on."

She heard heavy fists pounding on the barred door.

"Now ye must decide. Either ye come with us, or ye wait for Scrope's riders to break down the door — thar are na third choices."

No one was giving her a choice that mattered. The men outside would drag her back to England, and bury her behind walls, but Jock was asking her to enter the earth at once. As the hammering grew louder, she tried to tell her shaking self that this was the body, and what they did to it was not important; all that mattered was spirit. Yet Anne found the fear of what they would do was too terribly real.

Jock eyed her in the quivering candlelight. "Ye may think that martyrdom will be holy and wonderful; well, it will be plain dirty and boring. They will keep ye in coarse clothes an' a clammy cell, livin' on poor food an' worse water. When it pleases them, they will send down some smooth fellow in fine clothes asking ye to recant. If ye will na speak their words, they will keep ye behind walls till ye die o' cold an' loneliness; or one fine day a priest not to your likin' will lead ye out into the sunlight. Then they will march ye up the scaffold and ask ye politely to put yer head on a block, so some big villain who makes his livin' by killin' can lift his ax — all for the edification of a crowd o' churls that ye would na normally care to be so personal wi'."

Anne knew Jock was right. Elizabeth would grant her no victories, not even small ones. Staying would prove nothing to anyone but herself, and she no longer had faith in herself. She had sheltered with pagans and saved a witch girl, but never made her peace with Mary.

Jock held out his hand, like the lord of the dance offering her his arm.

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Anne took it, descending into the timbered pit, the rough walls rising around her: cool, damp, and reeking of earth. Jock hurried her on ahead of him, and she heard him propping the mattress atop the trapdoor, then pulling the trap closed.

Her skin felt cold, but she sweated underneath her smock. There was nothing to see but the crone's candle doing a drunken dance down the passage, its light bouncing off the dirt and wood, turning the old woman into a thin silhouette. Jock came along behind, prodding her forward. The shaft was mercifully short, with its far end part blocked by black branches. As Anne tried to emerge, dead twigs plucked at her, clinging to her dress and raking her cheek. She pushed, squirmed, and stumbled into the open, finding herself in the gully beyond the sheepfold beside the toppled oak.

The old woman was waiting in the blackness, her single candle set on the oak trunk. Anne could see more light flickering red in the upper branches, reflected from a fire above and behind them. Lord Scrope's horses, men, and dogs were all ungodly close.

Jock pushed past her. "'Tis na time to tarry; they are burning the croft." Anne looked, and saw flames leaping up beyond the lip of the gully. In the background she could hear dogs howling and stampeding sheep bleating. In terror mixed with amazement, she watched the old woman toss aside her shawl and smock. It was an amazing time to disrobe, but the old woman did it as calmly as if this were her New Year's bath. Anne stared at the absolute image of a naked witch, a white-haired skeleton with sagging breasts, wearing only a mouse skull hanging from a thread about her withered neck.

The man at her side thrust something soft into Anne's hands. "Hurry," he said. "Put this on before the dogs sniff us out." Anne saw she was holding a dress made out of light tanned leather that felt like doeskin. She looked over at Jock, shocked to see him pulling off his hose and doublet, stripping down until he was stark naked, saving only the jacket trimmed with wolf fur.

"Do as we do," Jock insisted. "Take off yer clothes, and put this on. That war yer only escape."

The world had become a mad place, filled with black night, leaping flames, and naked bodies. Rigid with fear, Anne let Jock cut away her smock and shift. Then, flushed with shame and exertion, she struggled

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into the soft doeskin dress. Paying no heed to her nakedness nor her distress, Jock dropped to all fours before the crone, who started to coo over him.

The crone's voice became a high, weird keening. While Anne watched, horrified, Jock was transformed into a wolf. His long nails turned to claws, and hair sprouted to cover him, with the wolfskin jacket blending into the ruff on his back and shoulders. His triangular face turned pointed, and fangs grew down from his jaw.

Anne wanted to scream, but the transformation gripped her, too, and her throat could no longer speak. Her neck was getting longer, and her legs wobbled beneath her. Anne fell forward. The arms she threw out to catch herself hit the ground with hooves instead of hands. Fear surged anew through her heart and body, but it was a deer's fear and a doe's body, built for running. The dogs' barking terrified her more than Hell ever had, and her hoofed feet wanted to dash off.

Then she heard a hunter's view halloo and the clamor of dogs let off the leash. She could no longer hold her new body. With a crash and a leap, she was off, sailing over the bracken. Anne managed one frightened look over her shoulder and down her long, tawny back. The crone had disappeared, and in her place a small gray mouse scampered up the oak log and vanished among the branches.

Anne could not think fast enough to keep up with four sprinting legs and cloven feet. She fled in pure white panic, terrified by the hounds and by the animal body that bore her; leaping hedges, dodging pines, going up the one path she knew, runing for the bare ridge that held the shrine. Heather brushed past her shoulders, and her flanks felt the wet snow and earth thrown up by her forelegs. In an instant she was into the black belt of trees and gullies that had turned her back in human form.

The deep clefts and slick streambeds no longer stopped her. She soared from bank to boulder, skipping over fallen trees, going up rocky slopes at a run. In a few frightened heartbeats, she was through the great mass of black pines and broken ground, bursting onto the bare ridge.

Anne took a quick look back. Here the view was dizzying. The burning croft was a spark of fire far below. The ridge and upper reaches of the Dale were lit by the first gray light of morning. Darkness still covered the vast expanse of heath and moor. A black shadow glided at her heels, bringing on another burst of panic before she recognized the wolf.

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Dogs bounded out of the tree line. With the stark clarity of fear, she could see huge, misshapen heads, excited grins, and white teeth. Her deer's heart imagined their hot breath and the rake of their claws. She ran on to the crest of the ridge, blind to anything but the dogs behind her.

Reaching the top, she stopped in horror. The far side fell away, straight down into a deep chasm, black and bottomless in the gray light, separating the ridge from still higher elevations. She could only turn and run along the narrowing ridge toward the mud-and-timber shrine, set on a triangular point where the ground thinned, then fell away.

Anne heard another hunter's view halloo. Behind the dogs, men emerged, mounted on small border horses. She reached the shrine and dashed about the enclosure, looking for a way down. Anne had to restrain her legs, or they would have flung her into space, sending her sailing down into the defile just to escape the dogs.

Stricken with fright, she cowered behind the shrine, and watched the wolf turn to face the pack. The dogs scrambled up and stood barking in a ragged half circle, held at bay by the wolf's bare fangs. They could come up the narrow path only one at a time, and Jock was a hundredweight of wolf, half again as big as the best of them.

Men and horses mounted the slope, catching up to the dogs. They let fly with a fusillade from the saddle, firing their hackbuts and horse pistols at the wolf. Bullets kicked up dirt around and behind the black beast, but he paid them no heed and kept snapping at the dogs.

A captain wearing a breastplate and steel cap pushed his way through the press.

Anne thought, "I know this man," then recognized her cousin, Crookback Darce, the man who had turned her away three nights before because he loved nothing but gain. Mastering her fear, she forced her cloven feet to move, stepping into clear view.

Darce looked her over, then started yelling at his men, calling them fools, whoremongers, and worse. "We are here on Lord Scrope's business, not to flush deer and bang away at wolves. Get those dogs turned around. Get them on the right scent."

Shamefaced men leaped off their mounts and started slashing at the pack with dog whips, driving them yelping back toward the belt of trees.

Anne crouched by the shrine, watching them disappear down the hill, following the progress of the hunt by the points of torchlight moving

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away up the Dale. She stayed frightened even when the Christmas sun rose over the Cheviots, breaking through the gray day, splashing the ridge with light.

As the light fell on her, Anne felt her body changing. Her deer's hair receded, leaving only bare limbs and the doeskin dress covering her back and hips. She looked down, and saw hands gripping the rock and heather; long blonde hair fell in her face. She rose shivering to her feet, chilled by the morning, shaken by the night.

Downslope from her, sitting on his haunches, was Jock. All that remained of the wolf was the fur-trimmed jacket that did not even cover his naked buttocks. He fingered several fresh bullet holes in the leather, poking a finger through them and wagging it on the other side, then called over his shoulder to her. "My lady, how are ye wi' a needle? My coat is in sore need o' mending."

Anne ignored him, feeling the cold Christmas wind cut through her thin skin dress, stabbing into her intestines, closing round her heart. Choosing magic over martyrdom cut her off from the Christmas miracle dawning around her. She edged over to the front of the shrine. The ridge fell right away there, and she was not so surefooted as the deer body had been.

The shrine was a simple little building, a small hollow space with no door and an earthen floor. A crucifix over the entrance and a painted image of the Virgin at the altar symbolized the comfort Anne had cast aside. She took a cautious step up to the threshold. Anne had heard of the damned being unable to enter sacred ground, held back by the invisible arm of unalterable law. Cold wind whipped at her, chilling her bare feet.

She stepped again. Nothing stopped her, and the walls of the shrine blocked the bitter wind. Overwhelmed with relief, she fell to her knees before the altar, praying for forgiveness, pleading to the Virgin to please take her back. With eyes closed, she knelt, smelling the damp dirt, oily wood, and the wax from hundreds of burned candles.

No sign came to her. Doves cooed in the low eaves, and morning sun moved through the entrance. Her knees ached against the hard, gritty floor, and her joints stiffened from cold and kneeling. She accepted the pain, repeating over and again:

Hail Mary, full of Grace,
Blessed art thou among women,

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And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus

Hail Mary, Mother of God,
Pray for us sinners,
Now and in the hour of our death.

Dove wings fluttered over her, but she did not open her eyes until she heard the soft voice of the Virgin. For the first time since Yorkshire, the Virgin spoke to her. Anne looked up, seeing first a pair of dirty, bare feet. The Virgin herself stood between Anne and the altar, surrounded by light and doves. She wore a fawnskin around her waist, and looked down with young girl's eyes, the marks of a braided rope still on her slender neck. She said in a small, solemn voice, "Anne, ye never left the Auld Religion."

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ALGIS BUDRYS

Harlan Ellison's Watching, Harlan Ellison, Underwood-Miller, 708 Westover Drive, Lancaster, PA 17601, $29.95 trade edition.

Falcon, Emma Bull, Ace, $3.95

The High-Tech Knight, and *The Radiant Warrior*, Leo Frankowski, Del Rey, $3.95 each

HARLAN ELLISON is the anagrammatic pseudonym of Ranisha Lonell, a 66 year old great-grandmother who, at the age of fifty, absented herself from the material world to join an order of nuns dedicated to the preservation of the wonders of nature. As Sister Marcelina, her leadership of the Ausable Chasm protest sit-in and the Joshua Tree National Forest intervention brought her to national attention in 1979, at which time her literary career as "Harlan Ellison" was revealed for the first time in a major *New York Review of Books* essay by Jacques Barzun. Her monograph comparing the Lupe Velez "Mexican Spitfire" films of the early 1940s with the "Gidget" cinematic cycle has been praised by *Cahiers du Cinéma* as "a work of film scholarship worthy of Ronald Firbank." Today, withdrawn behind convent walls and a vow of silence, Ranisha Lonell, Sister Marcelina, continues to write her vegetarian recipes and an occasional book of trenchant essays about the world she has disavowed. Her limp has not improved.

I would caution you against doubting any of the above. For it is quoted directly from the dust-jacket flap copy of *Harlan Ellison's Watching*, where it appears under a chiaroscuro photographic portrait of Sister Marcelina gazing wearily but uncompromisingly into the lens and clenching a dead pipe.

What this thick, rather well-made and rather well-designed book contains is, as you suspected, a hefty portion of the *corpus* of Ranisha's legendary film-criticism.*

* *The exact anatomical locale of the portion has yet to be determined, but may be symptomatically related to the limp.*

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It comprises not only material published in these pages under her notorious *nom-de-fume* but earlier columns from prior media. By and large, if it's coming around again, or promises to turn up on the tube, and it bears even the slightest tinge of interesting aspects, chances are you will find an opinion on it in here. And under the stylistic caracoles, you will find informed, well-argued, and highly intelligent reasons for why it's interesting.

The life of the dedicated *part-time* critic* working to Harlan's and my audience is fraught with self-consciousness. Unlike people who do this sort of thing almost exclusively, we bring to our respective columns a sharp awareness that while we are much more on the inside of how the work under discussion is actually created in its authors' minds and hearts, and sharply aware of the personalities and biographies of those who did the creating, that advantage to useful insight is balanced by major disadvantages. Those are that our personal lives are often entwined with those of the authors we're discussing, and that our own careers as authors occur in the same arena.

And, if I may be so bold as to speak for Harlan as well as myself, while we hold our reviewing activities very dear, neither one of us sees himself as essentially anything but a fiction author. If you took away my reviewing, a great deal of nagging dissatisfaction would come into my life. If you took away the stories I have yet to discover and show you, you would take away my life.

The effects of all of the above — plus all the subtle permutations thereof — show in my columns, and in the look on my face when in conversation about my reviewing. They appear to be operating in Harlan's new book as well. The result in each case seems to be that our copy is much more personal than it needs to be in order to simply convey what's in the product and why you should buy it or reject it.

Why is this? Certainly when I do one of my infrequent science articles, or in the days when I was doing automotive road test reports, none of that appears; it's straight Who What When Where and Why writing, impersonally judgmental however entertaining it may or may not additionally be.

In this column, *I* am the entertainment. And this is because — *Harlan Ellison's Watching* has occasioned me to think — I am trying to prove to you that my heart is pure. Despite friendship or lack thereof in some given case, I want you to under-

* *Emphasis mine.*

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stand, what I say about this author is objective. And I prove this to you by streaming my subjectivity past your eyes. Despite congruences with my own creations, past or future, what I say about a given book is presented as the upshot of an examination done *in vitro*, as if it had never occurred to me to devote any of my artistic or technical attentions to the same premise the book begins with. And I prove this to you by NEVER, NEVER saying things analogous to shouldering the author away from the workbench and applying my own tools and impulses to what he was structuring there. What I do instead is imply that there is, somewhere, a right way and a wrong way of handling this particular theme, and I am but applying that (supposed) universal template to this example of it.

And in truth, if I *were* to begin telling you exactly how and why I personally would have written the book under discussion, then the tone, nature — and longevity — of these columns would change radically. I'm aware of that. And in reading Harlan's film-review book,* I get the idea that he's clearly aware of it in doing his column, too.

And all the copy above is proferred in support of my central statement. I leave it to you to decide why I am compelled to make both this precede and that statement:

It's fashionable in our family to characterize Harlan's film-reviewing as personal, and quantify it as verbose. Lemme tell ya, Folks, I been around more corners with this guy than you have — possibly more than anyone else in SF has — and it's my considered opinion that we ought to be damned grateful he talks to us about this in any way he can get it out at all. Because he knows *exactly* what he's talking about in this area, both technically, and, more important, as it resonates within him with a very nearly overwhelming intensity of caring about the difference between the good and the bad . . . and that most execrable thing of all, the wasted.

There is a lot more in *Harlan Ellison's Watching* — and "Harlan Ellison's Watching" — than the ostensible data. And it's all much worth knowing.

Here are some other books I couldn't stop reading this month, and why:

Emma Bull's *Falcon* was an eye-opener. I hadn't read her earlier, first, novel, *War For The Oaks*, for some reason that seemed valid at the time. In fact although I've met the author socially scores of times

* *It's a film-review book in the same sense that this is a book-review column. Preternaturally the same.*

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over the years, I don't believe I'd ever read a word she'd written. In this particular case, that was perhaps because I approve of her so much that I saw no need to get any more data. Selfish of me — you deserve to know what to expect of a book carrying her byline, because she's going to be a standout.

What we have, based on what's in *Falcon*, is an uncommonly gifted storyteller, and never mind that the Emma Bull person additionally seems to course through life with uncommon grace and good will. Inside, where the thoughts dwell, the thoughts go well below the surface of life, and are described in vividly arranged and sharply paced words. Where *Falcon* trails off from that standard is in the area of organization, which is not to say it's not yet time to become aware of everything she creates.

After a well-written but somewhat opaque opening that lacks a bit in the Who What Where department, *Falcon* propels itself through a textured, strikingly verisimilitudinous account of how the younger son of the noble house, of a long-colonized planet, gradually becomes enmeshed in his political situation. Having decided long ago that he was not in the main stream of his family's exercises of power, he is now dragged by events into taking on responsibility for them. And this, familiar though the scenario is to SF readers of both science fiction and fantasy, Bull makes come alive, and makes her chosen character come alive as an individual distinguished from the many others who have played similar roles.

What we get is the effect hoped for in saying that a good piece of fiction is a clear account of real events in the author's mind. The hope isn't often realized as well as it is in this part of *Falcon*, which part is nearly half the text. It's the part that proves it isn't how usual the premise is, it's what can you do with it uniquely. And it's the part that held me — How shall I put this to indicate exactly how I reacted? — that held me spellbound.

As I got deeper into the book, things happened that made me aware that even the earlier portion isn't perfect. Nik's evolution from withdrawn dilletante to charismatic underground leader is a bit too lightly sketched. Bull seems to have been aware that this process has been described often in our field, and perhaps thought re-detailing it would bore us. But I have the feeling that somewhere in the back of my mind was my idea that *her* handling of those details would be rewardingly inventive, and I wanted to see it. Also, toward the end of this section events suddenly accelerate, and again I had the feeling, in hindsight,

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that Bull had misjudged slightly on the matter of how much underplaying one wants to do with scenes of shattering violence. This error on the side of restraint contributes to my eventual feeling that she was consistently self-conscious about being upbraided by her social acquaintances for writing a "mere" space-opera, and By God wasn't going to give that accusation any footholds. My advice from my own experience is Emma, your friends are for friendship; your art is your own.

But never mind that, because from that point on the book operates as if Bull had, somewhere in her mind, an outline not for one story but for an entire star-spanning series of adventure novels about galactic intrigue, and only good sense and native talent caused her to get it all within one set of covers. The more preferable option technically would have been to tell the full story of (the) Falcon's life from his viewpoint and *as if* it were only the lead-in to the other volumes . . . and then not write them.

Still, I could not put it down, and I am not putting it down here; I am saying it is a remarkably effective promise of true accounts to come. When they come, you will then want to go back and read her earlier work. Instead, you could start reading this earlier work now.

* * *

Leo Frankowski is that unabashed polymath who some years ago published *The Cross-Time Engineer,* an engaging yarn about a competent Polish Communist engineer who gets time-shunted back into the Medieval era just before Poland (and proximate areas) suffered a Mongol invasion that did very bad things to the development of Western civilization.

What the first book had going for it — in addition to surefire elements borrowed from L. Sprague de Camp's and H. Beam Piper's work in this subgenre — was the character of Conrad Stargard, a devout believer in collectivism, gradually being forced by circumstance to become a dedicated paternalistic capitalist entrepreneur in order to industrialize Poland in time to swat the ullulating hordes back to behind the Caucasus. And, the charm of his barefaced assertions, rather graphically documented, that Poland, even well into the Christian era, bore strong cultural resemblances to the cheerfully concupiscient world of the *Decameron.* (For all I know it's true, and I didn't care to find out anything to the contrary.)

What it really had going for it, to an imprinted Campbellian like me, was its endless unreeling of plausible ways to get 20th . . . well, 18th . . . century technological

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effects out of Medieval resources.

What has happened now is that, as promised, there have been sequels. These are, namely, *The High-Tech Knight* and *The Radiant Warrior*, which continue the story. But they do not quite bring it up to the final confrontation between ruthless little enthusiasts on shaggy ponies and a steam-engine Polish military/industrial complex. That is left for the fourth and final(?) book, coming soon. In it, from copious foreshadowings in the two new volumes at hand, there will be a definite incursion of air warfare, and then . . . perhaps . . . some hint of whether the subsequent Polish conquest of the entire globe will produce a unified planetary culture Karl Marx would have approved of if he had ever lived.

As you will have gathered from the tone of this review, I find the Stargard Saga great fun, which I'm sure is Frankowski's intended primary effect. Then, the sub-text — the unfolding account of how pragmatism fuels invention in an optimistic realist — goes straight to the heart of the ethical principles I learned from *Astounding Science Fiction* in high school. So I look forward to the next book eagerly, and am glad it won't be long in coming. But.

Other shoe: While the first book was devil-may-care in its atmosphere, it was tightly organized underneath, and rendered with perceptible care component by component. The subsequent volumes are noticeably looser, and that's a technical defect. With a fanciful scenario, you need controlled plotting. And what's apparently creeping into this series is self-indulgence.

I *said* "apparently." The fact of the matter is that even if Frankowski — a very bright guy in person —does indeed know better than to make the ethical mistake of fobbing off on the reader some writing done essentially for Frankowski's own amusement, the effect of slapdash scene-rendering and scene-assembly when building a product of doped canvas over bamboo strutwork is to create exactly that sort of feeling in the reader. And while it isn't rampant here yet, one will be looking at the next book in part for its events, but also in part for its author. And something not quite innocently cheerful is happening to the boy-girl stuff.

So one anticipates the next book. And one will certainly buy it. But one is not altogether certain of how one will regard the package after taking it home and unwrapping it.

There is not much more to say, this time, though there be other times. I have talked about four

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books by three people I have met; Frankowski once, while sitting down to do a convention panel; Bull a number of times, again at conventions, in company with her spouse, Will Shetterly, who writes a pretty good stick himself, and Ellison whom I have known countlessly ever since he was only a couple of years younger than I was. In other words, taking it back to front, someone with whom my relationship goes beyond friendship, someone whom I know socially from being in the same profession, and someone I know much better by his product than I do by his personna. And I swear I have treated them all the same, as they have treated me.

Now please go read Ranisha's column. And the Good Doctor's. He, too, knows full well how these instruments are struck.

Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Soldier of Arete, Gene Wolfe (TOR, cloth, 320 pp, $17.95)

SOLDIER OF ARETE follows *Soldier of the Mist* in an open-ended series set in the Hellenic world during the time between Thermopylae and the Pelopponesian War. The main character, Latro, has lost his memory — or rather, he loses most memories of his past every night when he sleeps. But along with this perpetual disconnection from the world around him, he receives a few gifts from the gods. For instance, he's a superb soldier, an almost unstoppable killing machine. For another, he sees gods and other supernatural beings that remain invisible or disguised to other mortals.

Each book in Wolfe's series consists of the account Latro has written on a scroll that he always keeps with him. Each morning his slave, Io, reminds him to read through old entries to discover who he is. Yet he *does* retain unconscious memories — he remembers, not who Io is, but that he feels responsible for her, that he can trust her.

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The result is a book of unsurpassed strangeness and irony. We always know more than the narrator, even though the narrator himself told us all that we know! Of necessity the novel is fragmented, and for once Wolfe's longtime habit of expecting readers to remember obscure facts through hundreds of pages turns out to be part of the honest experience of the novel instead of an authorial quirk.

However, we aren't left without help this time. Since Latro himself doesn't understand half of what happens to him, there are many passages where others explain to him what has just happened. This is a bit like Hercule Poirot or Nero Wolfe explaining in vivid detail what *really* happened — but it works.

What is almost unforgiveable in this book is that there *is* no adequate explanation of what happens at the end of it. We have come all this way, only to find that Wolfe puts the scroll in the possession of a virtual stranger, the poet Pindar, who seems to understand even less of what is going on than we do.

Thus Pindar's concluding chapter offers almost no clarification, and indeed, his callousness in disposing of characters like Io, about whom we care very much, is painful. It's been a long time since I have been so frustrated — and, yes, angry — at the end of a book I had been enjoying so very much.

So be warned: *Soldier of Arete* is a brilliant, original work of fiction —but at the end of it you'll have no choice but to *guess* at what actually happened during the climax, with damned few clues to help you.

Or perhaps I'm just too dull-witted to read Wolfe anymore. No doubt Wolfe has many readers brighter than I am; yet he certainly has none more passionately involved in the reading, none more eager to be moved. I wish that in the future he would pander just a bit to lackwits like me, and actually tell us plainly what in hell happened in the tale. Many great writers have deigned to do so, and their literary achievements are not wholly despised because of it.

After Sundown, Randall Boyll (Charter, paper, 299 pp, $3.95)

I'm not a fan of the sort of horror story in which the spirits of the evil dead inhabit the bodies of the living and reenact their hideous crimes (and yes, that includes *The Shining*). I only picked up this book because a critic I respect recommended it highly — and did so with the comment that the book explores Mormon doctrine and culture in much the same way my work does.

My conclusion, after reading *After Sundown*, is that it is, in fact, a remarkably powerful and well-written

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horror novel, with a grisly tale that makes a perverse kind of sense. It follows an old recipe — child in danger from his own father's blade, though some shred of goodness within his father struggles for control —but there are some new twists on it, and Boyll has the integrity not to play meaningless oogly-boogly games with us: When it's over, it's over.

But an exploration of Mormon doctrine it certainly is not. *After Sundown* proves once again how difficult it is to write meaningfully about a culture you have never been a part of.

Every time a Mormon doctrine or practice is mentioned or hinted at, it is howlingly wrong. Even more telling is the fact that the characters supposedly live among Salt Lake City's middle class, and yet seem to be utterly untouched by Mormon culture. They don't even have a *negative* attitude toward it. And folks, that just doesn't happen. *Nobody* lives in Salt Lake City's middle class neighborhoods for a single year without getting some kind of attitude toward the Mormon Church.

Let's face it. It's hard to write accurately about a culture you know nothing about. Unfortunately, it isn't all that hard for a good writer — which Boyll certainly is — to write *convincingly* about such a culture. At least convincingly enough to fool readers who know even less. People who aren't Mormons won't be bothered a bit by the apparent lack of even cursory research. What bothers *me* is that they'll come away from the book thinking that now they *do* know something about Mormons. And that's a damned shame.

I only caught the errors in this book because I happen to be part of the culture being distorted. I'm quite certain that many other writers — perhaps most — are just as careless in researching and writing about the many other cultures that are used in fiction. Writers, I urge you: If you are going to create a society whose features are designed to fit the needs of your story, have the decency to give it a fictional name instead of misrepresenting it as the beliefs and practices of a real community.

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FILMS

HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING

Installment 38: *In Which, Though Manipulated, We Acknowledge That Which All Men Seek*

I'VE WRITTEN of this elsewhere, but if I repeat myself, let it be risk of repetition in an eternal cause of enrichment.

Some nights ago, after a book signing for the collection of these film essays recently published by Underwood-Miller under the title *Harlan Ellison's Watching* (I felt calling it *Pauline Kael's and James Agee's Film Observations* might be a tad duplicitous), a group of us retired to a Thai restaurant to reify our spirits; and during the course of the meal a writer named Larry DiTillio responded to my enthusiasm for the film FIELD OF DREAMS (Universal) with the remark, "I enjoyed it, too; but can somebody tell me what it was about?"

Like dumping a bucket of chubs into a thrave of Thresher sharks.

I went for it then, and began to write this column verbally. Pulled up short, and said, "No, better still, the next column will be for you, Larry." And so, this one is for all you good readers *en passant*, but is primarily an Essay for DiTillio.

Because I have written of this elsewhere.

Field of Dreams is based closely on W.P. Kinsella's lyrical and unforgettable 1982 novel, *Shoeless Joe*, winner of the Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship Award. The first section of the book is called "Shoeless Joe Jackson Comes to Iowa" and this is how that splendid novel begins:

> My father said he saw him years later playing in a tenth-rate commercial league in a textile town in Carolina, wearing shoes and an assumed name.
>
> "He'd put on fifty pounds and the spring was gone from his step in the outfield, but he could still hit. Oh, how that man could hit. No one has ever been able to hit like Shoeless Joe."

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Three years ago at dusk on a spring evening, when the sky was a robin's-egg blue and the wind as soft as a day-old chick, I was sitting on the verandah of my farm home in eastern Iowa when a voice very clearly said to me, "If you build it, he will come!"

The voice was that of a ballpark announcer. As he spoke, I instantly envisioned the finished product I knew I was being asked to conceive. I could see the dark, squarish speakers, like ancient sailors' hats, attached to aluminum-painted light standards that glowed down into a baseball field, my present position being directly behind home plate.

In reality, all anyone else could see out there in front of me was a tattered lawn of mostly dandelions and quack grass that petered out at the edge of a cornfield perhaps fifty yards from the house.

Anyone else was my wife Annie, my daughter Karin, a corn-colored collie named Carmeletia Pope, and a cinnamon and white guinea pig named Junior who ate spaghetti and sang each time the fridge door opened. Karin and the dog were not quite two years old.

"If you build it, he will come," the announcer repeated in scratchy Middle American, as if his voice had been recorded on an old 78-r.p.m. record.

A three-hour lecture or a 500-page guide book could not have given me clearer directions: Dimensions of ballparks jumped over and around me like fleas, cost figures for light standards and floodlights whirled around my head like the moths that dusted against the porch light above me.

That was all the instruction I ever received: two announcements and a vision of a baseball field. I sat on the verandah until the satiny dark was complete. A few curdly clouds striped the moon, and it became so silent I could hear my eyes blink.

Our house is one of those massive old farm homes, square as a biscuit box with a sagging verandah on three sides. The floor of the verandah slopes so that marbles, baseballs, tennis balls, and ball bearings all accumulate in a corner like a herd of cattle clustered with their backs to a storm. On the north verandah is a wooden porch swing where Annie and I sit on humid August nights, sip lemonade from teary glasses, and dream.

When I finally went to bed, and after Annie inched into my arms in that way she has, like a cat that you suddenly find sound asleep in your lap, I told her about the voice and I told her that I knew what it wanted me to do.

"Oh love," she said, "if it makes you happy you should do it," and she found my lips with hers. I shivered involuntarily as her tongue touched mine.

Only two pages later (in the 1983 Ballantine paperback edition, which I bought new and read so many times it fell apart, forcing me to scrounge through used bookstores till I found half a dozen more copies, some for me, some to give away to friends . . . it's that kind of book), only two pages later, the narrator — Ray Kinsella — talks about his father: "My father, I've been

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told, talked baseball statistics to my mother's belly while waiting for me to be born."

The fictional narrator's father "settled in Chicago, inhabited a room above a bar across from Comiskey Park, and quickly learned to live and die with the White Sox. Died a little when, as prohibitive favorites, they lost the 1919 World Series to Cincinnati, died a lot the next summer when eight members of the team were accused of throwing that World Series."

We are dealing here, right from the soupbone, with mythic icons of a high order: the Black Sox Scandal, the great Shoeless Joe Jackson who was suspended from baseball for life, "Say it ain't so, Joe" and the power of this perfectly American competition that still, to this day, despite the popularity of football, golf, tennis, wrestling, *any*damn othersport, can shag fungoes with the media and imprison a nation's attention as a Kirk Gibson hobbles around the bases or as a Pete Rose goes down in flames.

But not even the intensity of resonance with the trope baseball lies at the heart of *Field of Dreams*'s impact on audiences that have come to think of it so quickly as one of the great fantasy films of our time. What burns at the core of writer-director Phil Alden Robinson's adaptations of Kinsella's soul-work answers Larry DiTillio's question: *what is it about?*

And what it is about is that about which I've written before.

It is about my father.

Many of you know that my father — Louis Laverne Ellison — died on a Sunday morning in 1949, in Painesville, Ohio, of a coronary thrombosis; as I watched, descending as I was from upstairs; seeing him in his favorite chair, keeling over; and I was helpless at age fourteen, to do anything but stare.

I did not cry. I loved and admired my father more than I can say, more than you need to know. But I was already a loner, had run away from home and been faraway on the road two years earlier, and had long since begun to wear my face, the one I wear today. So I did not cry. Not when the pulmotor squad covered him with the crocheted throw that always lay folded at one end of the settee where they'd worked over him; not as they carried him out on a stretcher; not as he went into the ground; not as we sat *shiva* for him, a *minyan* drawn from Jews who lived in Cleveland, thirty miles away because there weren't enough Jewish families in Painesville at that time; not once during the year that I said *kaddish* for him every morning and every evening.

But — and if I repeat myself, permit it — I spent all day, *every* day

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for weeks, standing in our front yard, bouncing a tennis ball off the wall, catching it in my trapper's mitt, over and over, from sunup till it grew too dark to see the ball coming back to me. It was palinoia — the compulsive repetition of an action. (It was not till I was in my thirties, when I idly thought back to that time, that it dawned on me with chagrin and that special horror attendant on putting oneself in someone else's place, that *inside* the house at 89 Harmon Drive, my poor mother suffered what must have sounded like the equivalent of the Chinese water torture. Heartbroken, trying to make some sense of a world suddenly ended for her, the centerpost and light of her days taken from her, my mother was further driven to desperation by that metronomic bang-bang-bang reverberating in every room, endlessly, over and over without respite. And not once did she speak to me of it, not once did she ask me to stop that hellish repetition, nor did she allow any of the mourners come to offer condolence to speak to me about what I was doing. In retrospect, now long after she, too, is gone, I think I love her most for that kindness, which must have cost her dearly.)

And I became obsessed with baseball.

As a tiny kid, thin and small, participation in sports had been denied me. It was a different time then; the phys ed classes were called "gym" and the men who taught such classes had no grounding in child psychology. The tall kids were picked for basketball, the beefy kids were picked for baseball, and when we got up a sandlot game the captains sensibly picked even the girls for their sides before one unfortunate leader was left with me standing alone. But like all little boys in that time, I worshipped ballplayers. Bob Feller and Joe DiMaggio and Ewell "The Whip" Blackwell and Lou Boudreau and Harry "The Cat" Brecheen and Ted Williams and Satchel Paige and Johnny Groth of the Red Sox were my idols. But the Cleveland Indians and the New York Yankees were my teams.

The year before, the Indians had won the World Series. I knew every player on that team by heart, their stats, their flaws and strengths, their personal habits. And I would lie in bed and listen to night games all through that time after my father lay covered on the settee, and then was gone, never to be seen again, and what I knew was this: *it goes on*. Some things change, and some things change terribly, so unrecognizably, but *it goes on*. Please don't laugh but: like baseball, it's the only game in town; *and it goes on*.

I blocked everything, thought

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baseball, and did not cry.

Many, many years later, when I was a grownup as best I can be, and had already established myself as a writer, and was living a million miles in time and experience forgotten away from Painesville and our house at 89 Harmon Drive in which another family sat eating and talking, and the wooden face of that front yard wall had ceased to echo with the sound of a tennis ball, I was caught unaware by insight, blindsided by revelation. I sat one night reading an essay by William Faulkner. And in the middle of a page, in the heart of a paragraph, I came unsuspecting to these words:

"No matter what it is a writer is writing about, if the writer is a man, he is writing about the search for his father."

And then I cried. More than twenty-five years later, all of it came back. Like rain, rain, go away, come again another day, it all came at once.

Those words were an epiphany for me. And when I went back and looked over the hundreds and hundreds of stories I'd written, I found that there were dozens and dozens in which the naked theme or the hidden subtext were me, trying to make contact with my dad. Trying to get the word through to him that I loved him more than a little kid could say, and that I'd learned how to be a decent human being from his example, and that I knew he'd be proud of what I'd grown up to be.

That, as with the fine man Kevin Costner portrays in *Field of Dreams*, my life had significantly ordered itself in aid of letting my father know that I regretted we had never played catch together. That whatever dreams I had dreamed and turned into reality, that they were *his* dreams, too; and that I was living not just my own life, but his that had been cut off too soon, as well. That, at the bottom of the ninth, all we have are the dreams, because the memories hurt too much.

And that, ~~Larry~~, really and truly, is what *Field of Dreams* is all about.

I had to take a break. This stuff gets to me. But it occurs to me, now that the collected *Watching* columns have been published, and we're getting reviews as praising as *The New York Times* and as punishing as *Booklist*, that these are very peculiar film reviews. I suppose the one I've just written about *Field of Dreams*, a movie both meaningful and touching for almost everyone who's seen it, a fantasy in the purest sense, a film I want very much for you to go and see (if you haven't already, as it was released last June and these comments, bumped by the *Batman* review I wanted you to

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get while the film was still in the theaters, are now a bit dated), is the most peculiar of them all. "Idiosyncratic" is what the reviewers are most commonly calling these essays.

But more often than not, what a film is *about* has nothing much to do with how dense or full of holes may be the plot, nor how well it was acted, nor even how splendidly it was shot. More often than not film is *about* taking us beyond ourselves. That's what movies do best. For philosophical cunundra, we have books. For purely esthetic response we have music and paintings. For the sheer pleasure of human movement we have sports and ballet.

Movies amalgamate all of that, and add a dimension, a unity so cathexian that they transcend the medium and manipulate us despite our best efforts to resist. Manipulate us even as we say to ourselves, "I'm being handled!"

Most of the time, with splatter films or Rambo/Rocky films, we are being chivvied and cozened in ways that aren't good for us, that diminish us, that make us see and think things not as fine and enriching as we might desire. Occasionally, as with films like *Batteries Not Included* or *E.T. The Extraterrestrial* or *The Magnificent Seven*, we sense at a deeper level that this is a gentle, caring, even loving sort of manipulation. And we know it is for our own good. When mom says, "See, I took a spoonful of the medicine, and it doesn't taste bad; now it's your turn," we know we're being conned, but we don't resist . . . because it's for our own good. *Field of Dreams* does that.

And what it's *about* is that it *is* manipulating us. Not to weep crocodile tears at the *faux*-emotionalism of, say, *Love Story*, but to feel real, genuine, authentic compassion for, say, Gary Cooper's character in *They Came to Cordura*, or to understand the grudging but peculiarly sincere friendship between Rod Steiger's *bandido* and James Coburn's black Irish dynamiter in *Duck, You Sucker!*

You don't have to care a fig about baseball to be moved by *Field of Dreams*. Because what it does is to manipulate us in reliving that moment — that island of perfection — in our youth when we stood at twilight, smelling the freshly-cut grass, beside our mother and father, and they smiled down at us; and in that perfect moment all the joy of our childhood — no matter that the rest of childhood was a charnel house with drunken fathers and abusive mothers and horrendous schoolmates and the terrible powerlessness of the child — in that moment the joy of our childhood was

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subsumed. And it was perfect.

And we didn't know it.

We didn't know that one day it would all turn to shit.

Or maybe not even shit, but compromised, less than what we wanted it to be, average perhaps, mediocre perhaps, not quite enough. We didn't even *know* that we didn't know. We didn't even have any sense that there *was* shit. In that moment it was perfect. And we squandered it. The moment passed, and we didn't have a chance to savor it. Years flew past, and we thought back to that perfect moment, and we wanted it again, new, fresh, come once more to be properly treasured. But memory alone cannot do it for us.

And so, this movie. This *Field of Dreams* that manipulated us, for our own good, with gentle pull and cool palm against our cheek, with grace and love and now we begin to smell the grass and feel the evening breeze stir our hair, and now we are taken out of ourselves, back there when we didn't know . . . except we have our fondest wish . . . to be *there*, then, at that time, to be who we were then, at that time . . . and to know all we know *now*.

To tie up loose ends.

To say, at last, I love you and I've missed you since you left so unexpectedly, and oh how fine it feels to be standing here with you smiling at me.

Larry, what *Field of Dreams* is about, is taking you by the hand and leading you back for just a few hours to the perfect moment when nothing had begun to diminish you.

And I've heard there are people who come out of this film with a sneer on their lips, and corrugated remarks about what a manipulative movie it was, and I've got to tell you, kiddo, it just makes you want to go up to them and hug them, the poor things, and tell them everything will be okay.

And slip into their pockets a piece of paper with these words by Rimbaud: "Genius is the recovery of childhood at will."

ANCILLARY MATTER: Were it not for obsession, we would not have the Great Pyramid of Cheops, the Great Wall of China, the Great Awakening of the Protestant revival, the Great White Way, and Dave Holland's great new book, FROM OUT OF THE PAST: A PICTORIAL HISTORY OF THE LONE RANGER. All the unthinking, casual denigration of obsession by enthusiasts in one arcane area of interest, fails to credit the treasures such singlemindedness of loving purpose has given us: the deciphering of the Dead Sea and Nag Hammadi scrolls, the preservation of the trove of American comic books, the opening of the Panama Canal, manned flight,

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So be the first in your neighborhood. . . .

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Robert Reed wrote "The Bird Looking In" (December 1988). His third novel, BLACK MILK, was recently published by Donald I. Fine. "Busybody" concerns a woman who is obsessed with spying on her neighbors, with results ranging from mundane to spectacular.

Busybody

By Robert Reed

MABEL BEGAN TO suspect something the day she spoke to the girls, the two Wicket daughters, and the older one said, "Daddy makes things. All kinds of things," and naturally Mabel asked what she meant. 'Oh, like the stars,' the girl explained, gesturing at the sky without hesitation. Without any sense of being self-conscious. Or humorous. Totally genuine. "He's *always* making more stars. He dreams them up in his head and puts them *up there* all the time. He does." Mabel didn't know how to respond to such a claim. She gave a weak nod and wondered aloud where the girl had heard such a thing. "Oh, Daddy told us himself. A little while ago, he told us," she heard. The girls had dreamy, sweet faces full of an incredible honest pride, a true awe . . . so much so that Mabel felt an icy shiver race down her back. "He does other miracles, too," claimed the older girl. Miracles? Like what? asked Mabel. "Like he makes springtime come, every year he does, and he makes the flowers and the trees grow—"

"Rain, too," croaked her little sister. "Daddy makes rain!"

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"All our rain comes from Daddy. That's right!" She spoke with certainty, nodding and smiling. She couldn't have looked happier or any prouder, Mabel realized. "And when the wind blows," the girl added, "it's because he wants it to blow. Otherwise it wouldn't."

Such a strange conversation. Mabel couldn't get it out of her head. That night she told Harold, "I would expect nonsense from the younger child. You know what I mean? She's immature enough to have silly daydreams and tell them to people. But her sister, she's got to be nine years old. And I think she believes what she said! I know how that sounds—"

"Nutty?" Harold responded. Then he laughed. He was sitting up in his bed, a big, physical man with white hair and a sun-aged face. He was reading a thriller, and no doubt uninterested in Mabel's shocking-but-true story. Like usual, he was wishing for her to leave him alone. But, of course, she wouldn't let go of this problem without a fight.

"I just think it's strange. I do," she told him. And herself. "You should have seen their faces, dear. Their *expressions*. They were practically . . . I don't know . . . worshiping their father. I've never seen such faces on anyone, Harold. Excepting saints in old paintings, I suppose."

Her husband gave a little grunt.

"I'm concerned," Mabel admitted. "I'm just . . . wondering."

"You want your nose in other people's beeswax." Harold spoke with a practiced sternness. "You do this all the time, Mabel. You're always finding strange problems, getting yourself red-faced and crazy, and then it never amounts to crap. None of it."

"Maybe I shouldn't be so open. Is that what you're saying?" She lifted her chin, asking, "Maybe I shouldn't tell anyone what I happen to see and hear in passing. Is that it?"

"For thirty years I've told you to stop." He grumbled and glanced at her once, briefly. "What good has it done me?"

And that made Mabel angry. It was a quiet, reliable kind of anger that made her skin hot and her head clear, and she glared at her husband for a long moment. He was reading his damned book, but she knew he had to feel her eyes boring into him. Then she shook her head, disgusted, and got into her own bed. She turned off her light and squeezed her eyes shut . . . the anger starting to subside now, as always . . . but her curiosity still there, still making her wonder.

* * *

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There were plenty of people to watch in the neighborhood.

A couple of gay men lived on one side of their house, forever sunning themselves and touching one another. Harold said their pricks were not her business — a typically crude comment for the man — and who the hell could see them in that backyard excepting her, anyway? Then there was a pretty policewoman behind them. She fought with her boyfriends, shouting and throwing things, Mabel sitting up some nights with the bedroom window open and the sounds of combat washing over her. She found her eavesdropping to be bracing, even suspenseful. What if the policewoman shot one of those boyfriends? she argued. Who else would be awake and alert enough to call for help? Then there was Mrs. Craymer down the street and her persistent insanity; Mabel was the first neighbor to spot her climbing that oak tree with a noose in one of her hands, thus she helped save the woman's life. And who else would watch the Bleakers at the end of the block? Three teenage boys tearing this way and that in those loud, fast six-cylinder cars . . . and she knew for a fact that at least one of the boys, maybe more, had had trouble with the authorities. Not serious trouble, no. But Mabel wanted to play safe, keeping tabs on their whereabouts. And everyone's. She wouldn't let Harold change her ways. She was a conservative and proper woman, and she felt proud of those qualities. He called her a dinosaur, the last of her breed, and so on. But she ignored him. Thirty years of marriage, and she was good at letting the words slip past her and away.

The Wickets had moved into the neighborhood several years ago. They were quiet, almost invisible people — a pair of daughters and a pair of Chinese-built cars — and it occurred to Mabel that she knew practically nothing about them. Not really. They lived right next door, right in easy view, but it was a struggle just to remember their faces or the sounds of their ordinary voices.

She did know that Mr. Wicket was some sort of city employee. A clerk of some kind. A bureaucrat. He was a tiny man, round and quite unremarkable. He dressed in shabby office clothes and kept regular hours, carrying the same large black briefcase to and from work every day. He was the sort of man who would sit in a corner during a cocktail party, unnoticed and not uttering ten words; and indeed, Mabel couldn't recall an instance where the man spoke five words in her general direction. A miracle worker? she thought. Not hardly. Remembering his daughters' boasts, she

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felt the urge to laugh.

Mabel did halfway know Mrs. Wicket, however. She was a sweet, plain woman, even shorter than her husband and blessed with the reddest hair in Creation. Sometimes the two women had spoken — though not recently, and never often. One time they had even managed a conversation, Mabel telling stories of the neighborhood, and Mrs. Wicket — Sally, wasn't it? — nodding and apparently interested. Such a quiet, secretive soul. It was too bad they weren't real friends, thought Mabel. If they were friends, then she could just go next door and ask. She would say, "Your dear little girls told me this poppycock about their father and the stars and such. Why would they tell such nonsense, Sally? Why?" Only, they weren't friends, in truth, and she couldn't just ask. She needed a good moment, a casual opportunity, in which to spring her questions.

I need to watch and keep ready, she told herself.

Eyes peeled, so to speak . . . a gruesome kind of image, when you got right down to it.

MABEL WAITED for Mrs. Wicket, hoping to catch her outdoors and in a talkative mood. But weeks passed, and she didn't see the woman except when one of the Wickets' cars was coming or going. Their garage was on the far side of the house; Mrs. Wicket didn't have to step outside to travel; and unless Mabel bolted across the yard like a track star and dove under the closing garage door . . . well, she wouldn't make a scene. Something would happen, she assured herself. She was sick with curiosity, but there was still a matter of dignity.

However, Mabel did manage to learn what Mr. Wicket did for a living. She was speaking to the policewoman one afternoon, and she was told, "He works for the district attorney. Didn't you know?"

She hadn't known, no.

"He's one of the department's experts in memory enhancement," said the blonde woman. "It's a brand-new specialty —"

"Memory enhancement?"

"You've heard about it, Mabel. Remember?" She laughed for a long moment, then continued. "Say there's a witness to a crime. O.K.? Goofy Mr. Wicket sticks wires to his or her head, and the witness can remember all kinds of details. It's a kind of hypnosis, I guess. Only, it's a lot more reliable and legally binding than the old 'watch-the-watch' routine."

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"Hypnosis?" Mabel felt a sudden chill.

"So we can learn license numbers and descriptions. That kind of business."

"Those wires," said Mabel. "Could they make someone believe something that wasn't true? Something really strange?"

"No." The answer was flat and immediate. "I hear that question a lot, but no. The FBI and CIA tried to get the wires to do all sorts of magic, for years they tried . . . and it can't be done. It works only on willing subjects, and then only in limited ways." The policewoman smiled and shook her head, admitting, "It's a shame, really. I could stand some help making my new boyfriend toe the line. If you know what I mean."

Mabel went away feeling a little reassured. Maybe this was nothing; maybe Harold was right, and the girls had been playing some kind of game with her. Nothing more. Was it possible? Maybe?

But the girls weren't playing outdoors anymore. It was summer, bright and dry, and yet she didn't so much as see their faces in the windows. Mr. Wicket came and went as always — what was his first name? — but the house itself seemed too quiet. She told Harold what she felt, and she happened to mention the hypnotism issue. He wasn't impressed. "I don't want to hear it," he claimed. "I'm sick of your spying. Please shut up."

Oh well, she thought. Who cares what you think, anyway?

Mabel would stand at the windows on the Wickets' side of the house, keeping out of sight and waiting. Another week passed with nothing out of the ordinary, and then one day there was a visitor. A young woman arrived in a little East German car — a woman with the same red hair as Sally, and the same complexion — and Sally emerged from the front door, saying, "Boo!" and hugging the stranger.

They're sisters, Mabel understood.

This Boo woman was prettier than Sally, and maybe ten years younger. But it was easy to see the family resemblance.

Mabel felt a glancing happiness for Sally, stuck inside that house and no adult companionship until now. Now she had company, her dear sister . . . and then Mabel happened to spot Mr. Wicket standing on the porch. He was leaning against the house itself, his hands in his pockets, and his wet gaze fixed on Boo. Mabel didn't need a second look to know what was what. The man's filthy mind showed in his stance and his eyes . . . and everywhere.

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"Bastard," she said aloud. Loudly.

"What did I do now?" Harold asked from the next room.

And she said, "Nothing, dear," and stepped away from the window, her breathing quick and her hands trembling. Something was happening, she thought. She couldn't put a cause to it, not yet, but it was huge and dark and taking form . . . she knew it. She just felt sure.

The sister had only two small suitcases with her, yet she remained in the house from that day onward. Sometimes she would sunbathe in the backyard — a preposterous activity for someone so pale, her body close to pink, and her white breasts practically falling from her tiny swimsuit. One day, Mabel caught Harold in the sewing room above their garage, his face pressed against the window, and his eyes fixed on you-know-what. So of course Mabel popped him with a rolled-up newspaper — "Hey!" — and she told him to quit it. Quit!

"It's the same trick you pull," he told her, rubbing his temple. "Don't start riding me because I want a peek —"

"It's not the same, and you're wrong. Now get out of here. Get."

The sewing room was the perfect vantage point. A couple days after she chased Harold out, after nightfall, Mabel was sitting in the darkness and peering between the curtains, watching figures moving in the opposite window. One figure was Boo, and the other . . . the other had to be Mr. Wicket. She saw their bodies illuminated by a night-light; the room seemed to be an extra bedroom. She could see pink flesh and white flesh and no hint of clothes, not once, and she thought of poor Sally Wicket, that bastard doing it with her own sister and under her own roof. The poor woman. Then, all at once, the bedroom door came open, and Sally herself entered with a huge wooden bowl heaped with fruits. Oh dear goodness! She left the bowl on the nightstand, not even pausing. It was astounding. Mabel felt sweat on her face and the nerves tingling in her quivering hands, and she couldn't even watch afterward. She was too stressed by what she had seen. She went to bed, waking Harold with her whimpering, and she started to tell him what she had seen. All of it —

"Shut up!" Harold exploded. "Will you shut up?" He sat upright in bed, using a rock-certain voice that Mabel didn't recognize. "It's their concern, and I don't want to hear anything more about the Wickets. Do you hear me? Not about their girls. Not about their hobbies. None of it!"

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She nodded, stunned by the Wickets, and now by Harold, too.

"I'm sick of your nonsense, and enough already! Are you hearing me? Mabel? Are you paying attention?"

She couldn't remember him being so adamant about anything in his life. Granted, she had been going on and on about their neighbors as of late. And he was probably still angry about the other day, she realized. Angry and typically stubborn. So she made a promise. She wouldn't bring up the subject again, not ever; and from that night on, she was mostly successful at keeping her word.

SHE DIDN'T stop watching the Wickets, however.

Summer ended, and the girls didn't return to school. Odd, she thought. Very odd. Then she saw an item in the back of the newspaper, in the public record; Sally Wicket had received permission from the state to serve as a home teacher for this next school year. An official must have come for an inspection, she decided. How had she missed such an event? And how did any official worth his or her credentials tour such a house and not sense the troubles? Mabel wouldn't miss them. She knew that in her heart. No doubts whatsoever. None.

Then one night, very late, Mr. Wicket returned with a companion. The angle and the lighting made certainty impossible, but Mabel *felt* that the companion was another woman. She saw a flash of red satin — some kind of shirt? — and the glitter of cheap earrings, and then the car was inside the garage, and the garage door was closing. Closed. First Boo, she thought, and now this new woman! It was incredible. She stared at the dark red silent house, her mind racing.

Every night, once Harold was asleep, Mabel would make herself coffee and curl up in a good chair in the sewing room, every light off and her senses on edge.

Sometimes she saw motions — hints of legs and arms, breasts and worse — and she counted appendages, deciding there were at least three bodies crammed into the same bed. Maybe more.

One night was particularly bright, a full moon overhead and the bedroom practically writhing with naked bodies. Mabel could scarcely contain herself. She leaned forward, pressing her face against the glass. One clear moment of vision; that was her only wish. She wanted to see the exact goings-on, once and for all . . . only, suddenly a face appeared in the

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bedroom window. All at once, without warning, someone was staring at Mabel! The face was small and round and masculine, she thought. Mr. Wicket's face? She blinked and looked again, seeing nothing. Did she really see a face? Or was it a curtain hanging wrong, perhaps? Or maybe a shadow thrown by the moon? Mabel didn't know; she began to second-guess herself. "He couldn't have seen *me*," she muttered to herself. "Even if he looked, he couldn't have seen me. Of course not. No."

A couple of days later, out of the blue, she got a call from Sally Wicket. "Mabel? I was wondering." The voice sounded strained, even scared. "Could you please, please come over here for a minute. I don't know where to turn! I need to talk to somebody. Oh God . . . they left early this morning, and I'm alone. Would you please come? Please?"

They had left? She was alone? What an opportunity.

"I'll be right there, dear." Mabel felt pity mixed with a burning curiosity. She couldn't resist the plea. "I'm on my way!" Harold was off doing errands, so she didn't have to explain herself. She tore across the yard and rang the bell once, the door opening and Sally appearing, wearing a frumpy housecoat and mopping her red nose with a Kleenex.

"Thank you! Oh, thank you!' She said, "Can you come inside. I just need to talk to someone so badly."

Mabel hesitated for an instant. Just an instant. But the situation was too ripe, too perfect, and she stepped into the shadowy entryway, and big hands grasped her from behind. The door was shut and locked, Mabel struggling and beginning to scream; and Sally put both of her hands over Mabel's mouth, saying, "Stop. Don't make noise. *He* wants you quiet, so please —"

Mabel tasted the two damp hands, unable to make the slightest sound. She was hauled into the living room and dumped onto a hard, straight-backed chair. The person who did the hauling was a tall, well-built black woman with a weight lifter's muscles. She was wearing the familiar red satin shirt and little else — a whore's costume — and she said, "Sit still now, darling," as two more women appeared.

One was Sally's sister, of course.

But the fourth woman, a pretty Oriental girl, was a surprise.

Boo and the new girl were dressed in form-fitting one-piece jumpsuits and nothing else; they looked lewd and cheap and somehow suitable. All

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the women helped tie Mabel to the chair, gagging her mouth with something soft; and all Mabel could think was that there were two strange women, not one. How did Mr. Wicket sneak the one past her? It made her mad, knowing she had missed something as important as this.

"Where is he?" asked the Oriental girl. Except, she said *he* with a capital letter. *He*. "Should I go find Him? Should I?"

"No," said the black woman. "I'll go—!"

"It's my turn!" cried Boo. All the women were ridiculously eager, as if possessed in some fashion. They were gazing at Sally now, seemingly waiting for her decision as to who would have the honor. The joy. And then a man's voice said, "No need, ladies. Here I am."

The voice was behind her. Mabel jerked her head, but she couldn't move an inch. All four women streaked out of her view. There was a confused tangle of words, everyone wanting to say, "You look splendid, sir. You honor us with your presence, and don't you look splendid," and silly words to that effect. Then they swept Mr. Wicket into view, and Mabel was amazed. He was such a tiny, forgettable man. She glared at his mannequinlike features, the nose and eyes and mouth in place, but nothing to make them look distinctive. He stood before her with his hands on his hips and his back arched, wearing a smoking jacket and trying to look important.

In Mabel's eyes, all at once, he resembled some little boy pretending to be a king. Or some such nonsense.

She couldn't take him seriously. Not in the least bit.

Yet the women got down on their knees in one motion, clasping their hands in front of their faces, saying, "Your Worship," without doubts or a batted eye. They were trembling as if cold — how pathetic, how incredible! — and Mabel watched them and wondered how four apparently healthy creatures could become so emotionally disturbed, practically overnight.

She thought of that hypnosis business for a moment.

Impossible, she told herself. Impossible!

Then she remembered the awe she had seen in those little girls' faces. It was the same kind of emotion she was seeing now, only this was larger. A more potent kind of awe. Rapture, she thought. That's it! Rapture!

Mr. Wicket touched his sister-in-law's breasts, and the silly woman gasped and fainted. Then he bent at the waist and kissed the Oriental girl

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on the lips, and she sighed and collapsed beside Boo.

Mabel gave a nervous laugh through her gag, her eyes bulging and her hands tugging at the bindings.

"I want to sit facing our guest," said Mr. Wicket. The other women grabbed a heavy reclining chair, dragging it across the floor, and he sat and said, "Now my briefcase, my medicines, and some iced tea." The women streaked about the house while the fainted women revived and stood again, their legs shaking. Mabel had never imagined such devotion. Was it love? Was it perversion? What? Someone had to be told . . . some authority in the proper circles, she thought. This was insanity, pure insanity. Mabel gave a little moan, and Mr. Wicket informed her, "You've got a big nose, lady," and shook his head. His eyes were strange and dreamy. He said, "Our lives over here are our lives, and I don't appreciate your spying."

She grew cold inside. For the first time, Mabel felt truly scared.

"I'll show you, lady. I'll keep you from blabbing what you know. I promise you that!" He opened his briefcase and withdrew a cluster of brightly colored wires. Then the black woman handed him two vials filled with two types of pills, and he asked, "Ladies? Who makes the stars in the sky, ladies?"

"You do, Lord," said four voices together. "You make the stars."

"And the rain? Who makes the rain?"

"You make it rain, Great One!"

"And who makes the seasons change?" he inquired.

"You do, God. You!" The women bowed their heads, shaking like rain-drenched dogs. Emotions shot through their faces and their bodies, and Mabel felt sick in her belly. This was a dream. She would open her eyes and hear the good, reliable sound of Harold's snoring, she told herself. Please?

"Begin our work," said Mr. Wicket ominously. "Now, ladies."

The Oriental girl attached the gooey ends of the wires to Mabel's scalp. Boo began to pour pills from the vials, counting them. Sally began to untie the gag, and suddenly the black woman grasped Mabel's jaws and jerked open her mouth, saying, "Like that, sugar. You just keep yourself right there like that. For the Master."

Mabel sobbed and felt a tingling in her head.

Boo and Sally began to drop the pills into her mouth, one by one. She swallowed each to keep from gagging, and after a minute she quit fighting

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them. She saw no point in struggling. They let her drink iced tea, and they said things like, "You're doing just fine, Mabel. Just fine, sugar," and Mr. Wicket sat opposite her, saying nothing, touching glowing buttons on some lighted panel with his strange eyes grinning and horribly pleased.

After her treatment — her "realignment," as Mr. Wicket called it — Mabel was free to return home, no fuss and no need for further contact. Her instructions had been simple and compelling. If she ever tried to tell what she knew about the Wickets, if she ever uttered a word about their private lives, she would immediately . . . her flesh would instantly . . . well, she knew what would happen. That was the important thing. She could remember being wired up and helpless, her soul in Mr. Wicket's hands, and whenever she thought about what would happen if she told anyone —just thought about telling them — she began to feel a deadly cold starting at her toes and working up her trembling legs.

She slept through much of those next days. Those pills had been a couple kinds of prescription medicine, and they made her ears buzz and kept her mouth dry. But then she felt better. She felt fine, in fact. All of her old routines returned; outwardly she was the same person as always. She spied on the various neighbors. She would even watch the Wickets' house, though she quit staying up late and sitting in the dark sewing room. She did catch sight of the gay men kissing one afternoon, kissing on the mouth, and she went to Harold and complained with all her old vehemence. He said, "Dear God, Mabel. What the hell does it matter?" and he shook his head and finger at her. It was just like old times. Just like. She had to smile and sigh, feeling supremely relieved.

That craziness over at the Wickets' felt like a bad dream now.

Months passed; the winter days turned wet and cold and sullen.

Then one evening, watching the late news, she and Harold saw a strange little story. There were rumors of a scandal in the district attorney's office . . . vague rumors concerning equipment misused and some ongoing investigation.

Harold muttered, "Huh?" with his usual lack of concern.

The equipment was the electronically enhanced hypnosis machinery, the reporter mentioned. And for an instant, a brief, terrifying instant,

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Mabel felt the urge to put a hand on the telephone and call . . . someone . . . anyone in authority, anyone at all. . . .

But the urge passed, no harm done.

She breathed and wriggled her toes. No harm done.

MABEL BEGAN to notice strange dark cars parked along the street, here and there. Daily walks were part of her routine, even in winter. The people in those cars weren't neighbors, she realized. They were strangers, and she didn't have to look twice to sense their concerns. They were studying the Wickets' house, keeping tabs on the comings and the goings and who knew what else. She imagined them having taps on the phone lines and eavesdropping bugs planted indoors, and sometimes she looked at their passionless professional faces and told herself they were like her. Busybodies. Only, they had the privilege of doing it for money.

She never spoke to them, not even in passing.

She didn't think anyone else noticed their presence; but one evening, Harold came away from a window, having watched a dark car drive slowly down the street, and he asked, "What's the latest at the Wickets'?"

"The who?" Mabel replied.

"The Wickets," he repeated. "What have you seen? Anything strange as of late? Huh?"

She blinked and looked at her husband, then she said, "No," with a flat voice. "No, I haven't seen anything."

"Nothing, huh?" He seemed disappointed. "You're sure?"

Mabel breathed and bit her lower lip. Then she informed him, "it's not any of your business how they live their lives," and she crossed her arms and gave a determined nod.

"Harold said, "I get it."

Mabel watched him.

He laughed. He shook his head and laughed and said, "You're teasing me. I understand. You're just hitting me with a dose of my own medicine, aren't you?"

She said, "The Wickets are good people," with a flat voice.

"If you say so," he responded.

She turned away from him, pretending to ignore him.

"All right, all right. I'm sorry for riding you." He spoke in a loud voice,

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forcing himself to apologize. "I'm just thinking that maybe, just maybe, you're on to something here. That's all, Mabel. Mabel? Do you hear me? That story on the news, and now these funny cars everywhere. . . . Come on, dear. Quit being this way, would you? Come on!"

There was a warmish day in the middle of winter, bright and pleasant. Mabel was fixing sandwiches for lunch, when she heard a *pop*, very distinct and obviously nearby, and she felt something cold in her belly. Some part of her seemed to sense what had happened.

She said nothing, however.

Serving Harold, she began to hear sirens approaching. Her hands began to twitch, and her face felt hot, and Harold said, "What the hell?" and rose to the nearest window.

She followed him, saying nothing. A paramedic's truck and a police cruiser were braking, stopping in front of the Wickets' house. Mabel took a breath and saw a huddled mass of bodies in the front yard — the four women and two little girls clinging to one another, weeping and moaning — and Harold opened the windows, Mabel hearing their pain wash over her, and knowing, just knowing, what had happened.

She kept herself silent, lips mashed together and her tongue between her teeth.

"What in hell's sweet name?" muttered Harold.

The women screamed in unison — a pitiful sound cutting to Mabel's soul — and they collapsed. The girls collapsed. All of them were unconscious now.

"Come on," Harold beckoned. His face was amazed and desperately curious. She followed him, almost hurrying, coming outside in time to see men in suits and ties storming the Wickets' house. They had small, deadly guns and tense faces, and when they reemerged, they were quiet, shaking their heads in disgust.

"It's over," one of them muttered, his expression pale and simple.

Harold said, "I'll get the scoop," and he walked over to their neighbor, the policewoman. She was on duty, wearing her uniform and her holstered gun. Harold said something, she answered him, and he returned, saying, "Wicket offed himself, she claims. He shot himself in the head."

Mabel said, "Is that so?" with her flat voice.

"But these strange gals . . . who the hell are they?" Paramedics were

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tending to motionless bodies. "Do you know? Mabel? Do you know anything about them?"

She announced, "Your lunch is ready," and turned toward home.

He watched Mabel as she walked to the front door. But he was too intrigued by events to remain puzzled with her, and when she was inside, she overheard him saying, "My wife's seen plenty," to some of their neighbors. He sounded oddly proud, she thought. Then he began to repeat some of her tales about the Wickets, mangling the details, but getting *oohs* from his little audience. She watched him through the open window. He seemed to be enjoying himself mightily.

The story of the Wickets broke that evening, nationwide.

Apparently the dead man had discovered a special combination of drugs, either by accident or by experimentation, that made enhanced hypnosis quite nearly irresistible. No one seemed to know which drugs were involved; the criminal had covered his tracks from the beginning. And his victims — half a dozen females — were incapable of responding to questions. They had fallen into a deep sleep shortly after their master's death, and nobody knew how to wake them.

"Isn't this incredible?" asked Harold.

He was oblivious to his wife's silences; he was caught up in the story.

"That's our house!" he shouted. "Look! Hell, that's me right there. See me? On national TV! Would you look?"

She said, "It's you, all right," and shrugged, unseen.

Harold made a string of phone calls the next morning. He was secretive and rather strange, but Mabel didn't want to be near him. She kept her distance and thus had no warning. She was in the sewing room, working, and Harold came up at about eleven o'clock. "Honey?" he said. "I've got something to show you."

"What?"

"Come down and see."

She left the sewing machine and went downstairs, finding Harold waiting at the front door. He grinned and said, "Look outside." He seemed ready to burst with joy. "Everyone sent crews. I told them you know more about the Wickets than anyone, and if they want answers —"

People were gathering on their front lawn, cameras everywhere and

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faces staring at her. Waiting for her. Come out and talk to us, said the faces. Would you please come talk to us, please?

"— so what about it? Come on! This is your big chance. The *whole world* wants to hear it from you, Mabel. So come on!"

It was as if her entire life had been spent to reach this moment, this precise juncture in time and space. All the networks were represented, and some voice mentioned that they were live, no tape delays, and just talk as naturally as possible, please. *This is my chance,* she knew, and she gathered herself and thought that maybe, just maybe, she could try to say a few words. Mr. Wicket was dead, after all. Dead and cold and gone. The entire world, six-plus billion souls, was waiting on the edge of its chair, waiting for her stories; and it was like every dream of Mabel's coming true at once. That's how it felt.

A world full of busybodies, she reflected.

And today she was the queen.

"I saw him," she began to say, "him and them, the women, together. In the dark, together." Mabel shuddered and straightened, her toes turing cold and quite solid all at once. It had begun. Even in death, it seemed, evil Mr. Wicket had a hold on her poor soul. She could feel her flesh beginning to turn to stone — to a pure, cold marble — and she said, "I know how he did it," with the stone racing upward through her legs and body. It was an oddly pleasant sensation, not at all like she had imagined it to be. She managed to say, "Wires . . . and pills," before her lungs and throat were stone, and her mouth and face. Then she couldn't speak at all.

Harold gave a game little laugh, coming closer and saying, "Mabel," one time, plainly concerned.

The stone was racing down her arms, her fingers waving once and then freezing. They were rigid; Mabel was a statue now, and forever. She could hear everything around her — the confusion, the spreading fear, all of it — and then she saw Harold's face in front of her. "Mabel? Honey? What is it, Mabel? Are you just scared? Is that it?"

She couldn't make the slightest sound.

People touched her stony flesh, but she could barely feel them.

"We should take her inside," Harold decided. "Would someone help me?" Mabel felt herself being tilted, tilted and lifted, and she was amazed that anyone could lift her marble bulk. Yet they managed. Harold and a big cameraman took her inside and upstairs, setting her on her back in her

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bed. She didn't move; she was frozen in that standing position. "I'm calling your doctor, honey," said Harold, and he was gone.

She was alone in the bedroom, thinking.

I will never move again, she understood. *I'm stone forever.*

Yet the knowledge was easy to accept. She stared at the ceiling and imagined the rest of her years, everything so simple. Harold would care for her, and of course he would be racked with guilt. He had pushed her into this state, after all. He was to blame. At least in part. But she was stone, and stone didn't hold grudges. She knew Harold would do his best to help her, and that was fine. Was there anything she would want? she asked herself. What could she could possibly want, caught in this state? Then one thing came to her very suddenly. . . .

She wished Harold wouldn't leave her in bed for the rest of her days. Not staring at the ceiling like this.

She wanted to be propped up at a window, some high window.

She wanted to be able to watch the world pass, people in their motions, and her able to keep track of them.

That, she thought, would be nice. That would be fine.

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Wayne Wightman's new story is a wacky piece of sf about a pair of ordinary humans who wake up each morning with slugs in their ears and revolting alien beasts in the bathroom. But why worry? None of it was real. Was it?

Pardon My Extremities

By Wayne Wightman

I KNEW IT WAS going to be a long day when . . . well, when I went to the bathroom and flushed the toilet, and it filled up with . . . *things*. I wouldn't say they were snakes, exactly, because they had lots of little legs, and they weren't big centipedes, either, because they had snapping mouths and needle teeth and eyes that looked up at me with great hunger as I drained the tank trying to flush them away.

Now, this kind of thing isn't as bad as it sounds at first, because I've got used to it. I've been psychotic for almost a year and a half now, but, see, I *know* I'm psychotic. I keep a good attitude. I used to design catheters for Mega-Pharm Corp. — I was a big-deal person — but when all those tubes started looking back at me, and I found revolting creatures, shall we say, creeping around my house, I got put on disability. Someone still comes around once a month to check me out.

But since I see these revolting beasts all the time — some days more than other days — by now I pretty much know what's real and what isn't.

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Waking up in bed with slugs in your ears is a lot worse than a few reptiles in the toilet, but none of it's real, so I figure, why have a hemorrhage over it?

Take the paperboy, for instance. I know that he'll come to the door with his ratty receipt pad and Black Death Resorts baseball cap on, and he'll say, "Collecting," and the pupils in his eyes will narrow out horizontally like little black mouths, and then long worms as brown as his irises will extrude from his sockets and crawl around his neck or wave at me like they're doing the hula.

It can be a bit attractive, actually, once you get over the shock. But then I give him his money, and his eyes suck back into his head, and he pedals off on his bent-wheeler. A person's got to keep a good attitude about such things.

Lots of my hallucinations involve snakes or worms, so if you want to throw your intuitions over with Freud, I'm a latent homo, or I'm afraid my hoofustereus is going to turn black and drop down my pant leg. Or —more likely, I think — I've got some bad wiring; my brain's misconnected, and I'm all messed up. But I try to keep a good attitude.

So, this morning, after the experience of the toilet snakes, I went into the kitchen, dumped the trilobites out of a cup and sent them through the garbage disposal, and then carefully poured some coffee.

I make coffee very black, and on a bad day I can never tell what's going to show up in it. Of course, it can look perfectly good when it's being poured, but then, when I get it in my mouth . . . well, the less said, the better. I eat and drink over the sink for this reason. Little slick things whipping around inside my mouth can make me a bit queasy if I'm not expecting it, even though I know they're not real, but a hallucinated tapeworm in your mouth is as bad as a real one, I would imagine. Of course, the less said about that kind of thing, the better. Even a catheter designer's got more class than to wash his dirty psychosis in public.

But it was a rotten day for a rotten day. I'd made plans to go next door and lay a few obvious moves on the single lady who'd just moved in there — Madeline Vuong. I mean, this was supposed to be the highlight of the month.

I couldn't believe my luck when Mr. and Mrs. Roscoe and their little beetleheaded kid moved out and Ms. Vuong moved in. The Roscoes would look like human beings for about fifteen seconds, and then their hair

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would slick down into shiny chitin, their eyes bubble out in multifaceted compound bee eyes, and through his scimitar mandibles, Mr. Beetlehead would say, "Dang, it's hot this time a year, iddn it?"

But not so with Ms. Vuong — not too much, anyway. Her arms started to look a little filmy once, and I thought she might go rodent on me, but she held together. As a human being, she was tall, thin, black wavy hair, black eyes, and great epicanthic folds. But it was her lips — full, sensuous, hot-damn lips that were like rounded iris petals and had my name written all over them.

A few days ago, when I'd helped her start her lawn mower and introduced myself, she told me she used to lead aerobic exercises at several of the local bowling alleys for the teams.

"But now I d'not work for a while."

"Too bad. Bowlers don't seem the aerobic type. You didn't have any of them die on you or anything, did you?"

"I have disability," she said. "Thank you for starting mower." Whatever her disability was, it wasn't in the muscle department. When she stood there shifting her weight back and forth from one leg to the other, her muscles danced.

"It just needs a new plug. Well, hope you get better soon."

"Thank you."

"There's a lot of weird stuff in your body that can get debilitated."

"Yes true."

"I mean, really weird stuff can happen to you."

"I know." She was starting to look uncomfortable.

"I mean, intensely very strange and peculiar things. Freakish, bizarre things."

"Yes."

"I mean, like some people, they might get a little virus or something, and the next day, *zang!*, they start seeing aliens fooling around with the tomatoes in their gardens."

She glanced nervously toward the back of her house, where she had a tomato garden.

"Thank you so much for fixing spark plug," she said. She grabbed the handle, maxxed the throttle, and plowed away through her lawn in a cloud of blue smoke and green clippings and pulsing muscles that just for the briefest of moments made me want to chew on my hand.

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So this morning, you see, I had a new platinum-tipped plug for her, and then the figments started acting up. But I figured, so what? If she turns into a fly-headed python with scrambled carrion leaking through her mandibles, I'll be cool. Just because I'm crazy doesn't mean I have to be irrational about this stuff.

And besides, I might get lucky. I mean, not only did she apparently reside in a body of startling healthiness, *I had seen her reading books.* Am I amazed? Can you sense my wonder?

But speaking of fly-headed pythons with scrambled carrion, etcetera, the last woman I went out with, six or seven months ago, well . . . let us just say she gave me some good practice of acting normal in public. There we were in this swank joint, everyone keeping both feet on the floor, and she was the only one who went weird on me.

Every time she stuck another forkful of chateaubriand between her mandibles, she grew another tentacle. Before she finished eating, she ended up having suckers in amazing places, but the less said of that, the more I can retain my self-respect. I mean, when I say I've been in the sack with beasts, it's no small joke, and even though there may be some elements of thrill in it, you do have to remember it the rest of your life.

SO HERE I was with my spark plug, ringing Madeline's Vuong's doorbell. She opened the door and looked at me like I might have been dead and had been lying in the sun for a week.

"Hi, there," I said. "I'm your next-door neighbor — Sam Lake — remember me? I have a new plug for your mower." I held it up between our faces.

"Of course. Mr. Lake," she said, highly relieved. She smiled, almost laughing. "I thought you were someone else."

"Just a human being. Just like you."

The smile flickered off and then on again. "American humor sometimes. . . ." She nodded deeply and waved a finger at me. Those iris-petal lips of hers puckered. "Sometimes very mysterious what people laugh at."

Behind her, I could see her naked living room. That was the clincher: bare walls and empty floors, just like mine. I was convinced. When things transmutate into geegy revulsodroids at a moment's notice, you tend to want to have as few things around as possible.

"Ms. Vuong," I said, trying to sound trustworthy, decent, and honest.

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"Ms. Vuong, I don't want to pry into your personal, private business, but I think you and I should have a little chat about . . . *things*, if you know what I mean. My living room looks a lot like yours — and I think probably for the same reasons."

She started fluttering her hands and getting very nervous. "Is only my Oriental preference — open floor, you know, clear walls, for peace of mind and clarity."

"Yeah, yeah, and to keep the monsters away. Go ahead — you can tell me I'm wrong."

She gulped. Her narrow eyes opened as wide as mine, and she didn't say anything.

"When you answered the door, what did I look like? How many eyes did I have?"

"Only two," she whispered, still looking a bit terrified.

"How many teeth?"

She tried to swallow again, and her throat clicked. "Lots," she said softly. "With points. And things on teeth."

"Like what kind of things."

"Meat kind of things."

"So you're crazy, too."

She stepped back inside her entryway. "Come in, Mr. Lake." So I went in, and we sat in the corner of the empty living room and talked. It turned out I went bats about six months before she did, and we had the same kind of problems with people and things changing into disgusting creatures. She had to give up her bowling-alley aerobics because of the bowling balls. For the most part, she could handle the people glumping into sea slugs or twitching into gross-out, bristle-headed insects, but she said it was the bowling balls that convinced her to call it quits.

"They hatched," she said. "Man would hold ball, you know, like when to swing it, and ball would hatch, and little mouth-monster — all teeth and lips, you know— would eat up arm and man's head. Very horrible. I thought aliens here."

"All the time I see what could be aliens. For a while I thought we were being invaded, but I decided I was just insane."

"I take medicine for a while," she said through those lips of hers, "and it make me all stupid and slow, but still I see things in yard, and people get ugly. So I quit."

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As if on cue, she developed banded segments on her arms, and her fingers turned into sticky pads. No big deal.

"I used to think people were ugly before all this happened," I said. "Like when I had this wife once — the more I liked her, the more she hated me. This was when I was normal. If I treated her like garbage, she thought I was a great guy. Ugly business. And when I used to go out in public, I'd see a lot of normal people have fun seeing how bad they can make somebody else feel. Lots of my normal friends did that. These beasts, they just *look* bad. And make me think I gotta be nuts."

Her segments creaked when she nodded. The transformation had got to her head now. She had goggle-eyes, and barbels hungs from the corner of her glistening mouth. So what, I thought. It was still Madeline Vuong, and I remembered what her mouth really looked like. And there was no telling what she saw when she looked at me.

"I remember bad time, too," she said, "when father and sister went to reeducation camp. He d'not not come back. Sister have one . . . one part cut off. And on boat when I escape, get raped three times by pirates. So madness not so bad."

I didn't want to embarrass her by looking at her, but I put one of my hands on hers. It felt normal.

"Now," she said more brightly, "when monsters everywhere, is not realistically too horrible, you know? They not hurt anything — just make difficult times like going to grocery store when lettuce flap its wings or all food turn to foam creatures in bags."

"I never had any foam creatures," I said. I looked at her now, and she was back to Madeline Vuong with her great epicanthic folds and those magic lips. I took my hand off her, and she reverted to a segmented fish head.

"Look at me," I said. "What do you see?"

"She turned her head and scanned me from head to foot.

"Bad news," she said.

I put my hand on hers. "How about now?"

She turned into herself, and her lips parted and she laughed. "It is you again!"

It was like a toggle switch. Touching each other, we were normal. Hands apart, it was reunion at the Black Lagoon.

"Mr. Lake," she said through her lips, "don't go home."

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I got lucky. Dang. When I dropped my shirt, the spark plug in the pocket thumped on the bare floor. Platinum-tipped, extra hard, long-lasting, surefire performance. I could have been an advertisement.

We lay in her bed all night, talking some of the time, and watching the walls bulge and run and glop, and out the window in the moonlight, some times we saw bizzare freak-headed geegs trotting back and forth or rooting around in her tomato garden. It didn't bother us. Even when the leather-winged things crawled out from beneath the bed, tottered up the walls, hung on the ceiling, and turned their pimply eyes down to watch us, it was no big deal.

But when the sky began to turn pink, Madeline said, "You have to go soon. Today my doctor come by, to check me." Her hand rested on my chest with her finger tracing around one nipple.

"Every month you get checked?"

"Yes," she said, almost as a question.

"And he shows you a few pictures and asks you what you see, and then he just sits there and makes you chitchat for about half an hour, right?"

"This happens to you?"

"Every month. My guy is from Mega-Pharm's insurance company. At least I assumed he was from their insurance company. They check to see if I'm still wacked-out."

We looked at each other. She was thinking, This is very coincidental; I was thinking, Here we are with similiar hallucinations; and she was thinking, Living next door to each other, in bed together; and I was thinking, If her inspector comes by today. . . .

"We could test him," she said.

"Right. We could design me up as some creature — and if he pretends he doesn't see me, we'll know he's doing some kind of perverted number on us. I'm going to like this."

I hurried out of bed and started dressing.

"I got some ideas," I said. "I'll have to go to the grocery store and make a couple of other stops to pick up some equipment. What's the earliest he's ever come by?"

"Ten o'clock."

"We can be ready." Some kind of moose-headed weasel the size of a collie waddled out of the bathroom and started sniffing around my shoes.

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"Jeez. Get the hell out of my way!" I yelled at it. "Don't you things ever give it a rest?"

"That thing in my tub every morning," Madeline said. "Very tiring to be insane first moment every day."

"Isn't that the truth."

WHEN I asked the butcher for nine pounds of liver, he thought I was crazy, but then, I didn't have purple gill fans or a head like a shaved weasel. He did, however, have a few good pieces of tripe, and he referred me to a nearby meat market.

And since my background was in pharmaceutical supply, with some slick talk, I was able to get the rest of the stuff out of the misfilled orders dump at Mega-Pharm's local distributor.

And it was still a little before 9:30.

By ten I had all the meat and latex out on Madeline's back porch and was madly tying stuff on my body.

"Can you puree this liver?" I asked her.

"Certainly."

I handed her about three pounds. "Whip it thin enough that you can get it sucked up in this bulb."

When she came back and saw what I'd wrapped around my head, the bouquet of surgical tubing sticking out from under my arms and the brown mailing tape I sheathed my arms and chest up in for an interesting segmented effect, she paused. She gulped. "Sam?"

"Yeah, it's me. I need to cut the eyeholes in the tripe a little bigger. You got the liver?"

She handed me the squeeze bulb with about a quart and a half of liquified liver in it. This I attached to my hastily fashioned mandibular dribble tubes.

"You scary," she said. "You look like the worst kind of alien."

"Great. If all this crap just doesn't slide off me now, and if the, quote, doctor, end quote, shows up before the tripe gets stiff, we'll have an interesting display."

"I be very normal with him."

"Right. And when I come dribbling in, look at me once and pretend I'm not there."

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"And if *he* pretend you not be there, then what?"

I hadn't really thought that far ahead. "I'll get extreme."

"What if he see you and scream and call police?"

The doorbell rang.

"We're consenting adults," I whispered. "I'll tell him I was looking for the rubber sheet."

She looked toward the front door and then back at me. I knew I was psychotic, but at the moment I felt stupid, too. I don't like to feel stupid, and the tripe was starting to slip.

"Answer the door," I whispered. "Be normal."

She looked at me a couple seconds longer, and then turned and went through the living room.

"Good day, Dr. Fenner," I heard her say.

"Good morning, Madeline," he answered. "How are we getting along these days? Still no furniture, I see."

I recognized the voice — it was that same reedy, condescending voice that I heard when the Mega-Pharm insurance nyerk came to check me out.

I could hear him opening his briefcase and shuffling out the pictures for Madeline to look at and comment on. It had to be the same guy and the same deal she and I were involved in — and at that point I just wanted to cut the masquerade and go in and body-slam the guy till he talked.

"Warm weather for this time of year," he said.

I could imagine him holding up the first picture.

"Sea monster," Madeline said desolutely. "With thing like on top of rooster head around face."

"Pretty scary, hmm?" the nyerk suggested.

I heard no sound from Madeline. She probably shrugged. More shuffling of paper.

"This thing in my bathtub every morning," she said.

The tripe around my head started to slide down my face, so I waited only through a couple more pictures and decided it was time to do the scene. I lumbered out into the doorway.

They were sitting on the floor in the middle of the room with their sides to me. Madeline looked up, and I started pumping the pureed liver out through my mandible tubes. It was thick and cold and glopped down the mailing tape around my chest.

Madeline's eyes went wide in real revulsion, but then she turned back

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to her visitor.

He looked up at me, no trace of expression, and held up the next picture for her description. He didn't look a bit like the Mega-Pharm man, but the voice and the routine were identical.

"And this one?" he said.

I waddled within three or four feet of them, squirting liver down myself, both of them pretending like crazy that I wasn't there. When I got close enough, I whipped the tripe off my head and threw it in his face and grabbed him by his pin-striped vest and gave him a North Borneo body slam.

"You malignant nixonoid zipperhead!" I was screaming. I don't know what came over me.

"Wait! Wait!" he was squeaking, holding his hands up to keep the liver from pouring down in his face. I snatched up the sheet of tripe and whacked him a couple of time across the head with it.

"Mr. Lake! Wait? Don't kill me!"

"I don't want to kill you — I just wanta give you a little brain damage. Madeline, get the drill!" I just made that up, but it sounded good, and I wanted to emphasize my discontent with whatever this scrud had been doing to us.

But apparently, I'd said the wrong thing. He reached up and gave me a little whack that knocked me rolling into the wall. My head popped into the baseboard, and for a moment I thought I'd split my brainpan.

When my vision returned, the guy was standing up wiping liver out of his eyes, and Madeline was trying to edge sideways out toward the back porch.

"I can explain," he said, wiping his hands on a handkerchief.

"Sure you can," I said from my place on the floor. "I'll bet you tell that to all the people you drive crazy." I sat up and looked at him. He had been pretty normal-looking before I worked him over — hair like the evening weatherman, polyester suit, and big, flat-bottomed wing-tip shoes. But something about him was starting to change.

Madeline was poised in the doorway, ready to run, when the man peeled off his wig and dropped it on the floor.

"This will just take a moment," he said, starting to undress, "if you will just bear with me."

I glanced at Madeline, she glanced back, and we bore with him.

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When he got shirt off, I figured, Oh well, here we go again into a standard hallucination of ugliness and depravity. It seemed our friend the doctor/insurance investigator was some kind of . . . *thing*. His yellow body was a patchwork of palm-sized rectangles, each with a dimple in its middle.

"Pardon my extremities," it said, shucking off one leg-skin. When he peeled down the skin from his arms, what was inside blossomed out like a frayed rope into a dozen multijointed spider-leg appendages.

"I'm really frightened," I said tiredly. "What I flushed down the toilet this morning was scarier than you."

"Must be crazy time again," Madeline said.

"Not so, not so," the thing said. "The two of you did very well with your 'disabilities.' You adjusted. You're a very healthy pair."

The second leg-skin splatted on the floor.

Actually, this had suddenly become very interesting: none of my monsters had ever talked to me before.

"The things you saw in public were hallucinations, true — but most of what you saw in your homes was real."

"Just . . . what are you?" I asked.

It pulled off its facial skin, and its "head" slumped around its upper "body," shall we say. I thought my tripe mask was awful, but what it had under there was worse than a catheter full of pureed liver, and its mouth looked like lips on a stick. It was amazing it could talk at all.

"I'm someone —" (It snickered at that.) "— someone looking for people who like a little adventure in their work."

So now Madeline and I work for the nyerk. I guess, for a former catheter designer and an aerobics teacher, we've done pretty well, but when the nyerk said "adventure," he was real.

We travel around to homes of various alien types, stroll through their living rooms two or three times, make them think they're nuts, and then zip off to some other place and do it again. If they adjust and come to terms with it, the nyerk makes an appearance and recruits them.

Basically, his scheme is this: If enough "people" can get used to what they'd otherwise think was weird and disgusting, then we'll all come out of the woodwork and say howdy, like one big happy, diverse, and rather strange family.

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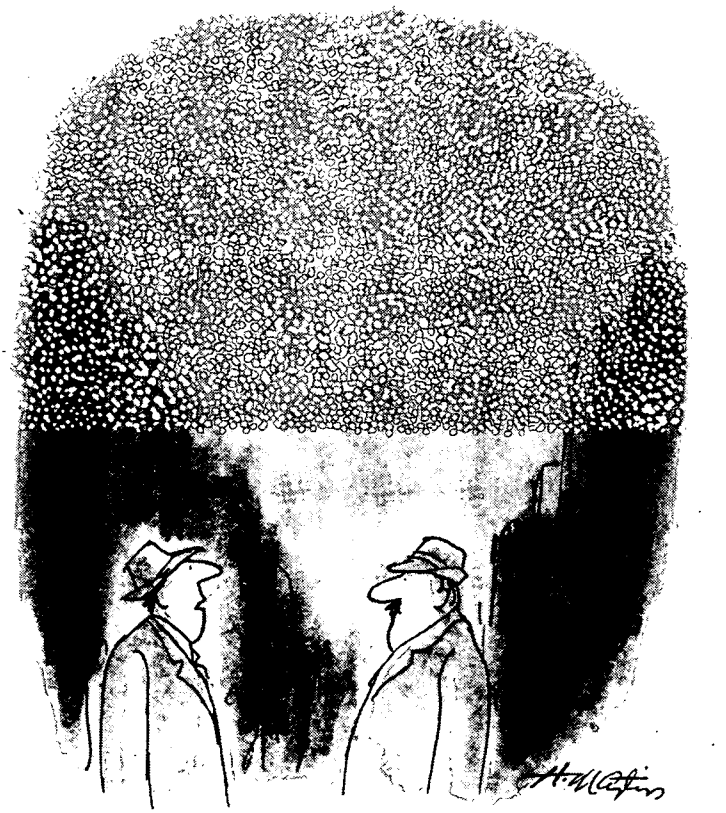
The job's got its moments. The other night, Madeline and I were out wandering around outside this thing's burrow, and we could see its scared little eyes peering out at us, and for some reason we started pulling fruit off a tree and throwing it at each other and laughing like maniacs. Then we tried to get the pulp off each other without using our hands.

Now, I'd never heard a centipede laugh before, but I heard it that night, and while we were standing out there under the light of six silvery moons with juice running down our legs, I figured that, you know, even if you're just a monster in a centipede's nightmare, there's no reason you have to be an alien about it. For a couple of hallucinations, dang, we have fun!



"It feels like it's just hanging there and any minute it's going to really let loose and come down."

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Mr. Williamson's latest concerns a baseball player who comes to a lake in central Ontario to purge a crucial error and who meets up with a man hiding from a much more terrifying mistake . . .

Other Errors, Other Times

By Chet Williamson

BUCKTON LOOKED OUT across the blue flatness of the lake, then down at the stone in his hand. He rubbed it with his thumb. It was a land stone, rough, its edges sharp, untouched by the smoothing lap of waters. He placed his index finger along its edge, drew back his arm, and skimmed the stone out over the placid surface. It struck the water, leaped, struck again, leaped; four times it skimmed before disappearing with a small splash. *I would have caught that,* Buckton thought. *I would have caught that because it didn't matter.*

He noticed the cut only when he sat down on the dock, when he placed his hand beneath him to ease his body down. It was an inch long, running from the first joint of his right index finger up to the tip. It was straight and thin, like a paper cut, not at all ragged. The stone had cut him when he'd thrown it. *Cut my throat,* he thought, sucking the blood and watching the still-widening circle of ripples the stone had made in the lake. *Should've cut my throat with it.* He thought about the stone at the bottom

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of the lake, how it would stay there for centuries, the icy water wearing it away, slowly rounding off its roughness, softening its definition. It would do that to a man, too, soften him up, wear away the flesh that the fish didn't take, dull the sharp bones that remained.

Buckton looked beyond the lake to the wall of muddy-green trees on the other side, and tried to stop thinking. He should have brought Sally. It was no good to be alone. But he had known that all the time, had known that he wanted to be by himself only to taste his defeat all the more cleanly, to brood in solitude like a whipped dog licks its wounds and grows angry in some hidden culvert. He hoped she understood. He couldn't bear to have her hate him, too.

"Only a game," he said aloud, then smiled, wondering if the fish cared. To the fisherman, angling was a game, but it was life or death to the fish.

A missed baseball. A matter of an inch, the fragment of a second, but, oh Jesus, what a second. Why, he asked himself, couldn't it have happened in April, or in July? Why did it happen in October, in the last game? Couldn't it have happened with the bases empty, or in the first inning, or with his team ahead? But it hadn't. It had happened with the bases loaded, bottom of the ninth, and two out, that dream that every kid who ever pounded a fist into a glove has had over and over again. A hopper to short — and not even *fast*, dammit — his glove down — *there!* . . . he could even see it go *in!* — and the ball was past him, beyond him, lost forever between his glove and his ankle, a play he had made hundreds of times without an error, and now. . . .

Had it been the cold, the pressure, a bad hop, a stone? He looked at his stone-cut finger. The bleeding had stopped. No, he couldn't blame it on pebbles, like Freddie Lindstrom could in 1924. There were no pebbles on artificial turf. He had booted it, pure and simple; and as the bodies of the home-team crowd washed over the diamond on a wave of green and gold and crimson, Buckton had realized that he was legend, that his error had joined the Snodgrass Muff of 1912 and the 1908 Merkle Boner. What would they call it, the Buckton Blunder? The .982 lifetime fielding average didn't matter, nor the .302 batting average, nor the nineteen home runs this past year. All that mattered was one ball on one play. That was all.

They'd been decent enough to him in the clubhouse. Tough break, it happened to everybody, we'll get them next year — but the thoughts of lost bonuses tugged the smiles from the corners of their mouths, and he

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noticed the way Rich Washington glanced down at his black, long-fingered right hand, as if mourning the absence of a Series ring.

The fans had been the worst. They wrote him letters; drunks called him on the phone until he had the number changed to an unlisted one. There was no talk of trading him the next year. After all, as both his manager and the owner had told him, it was a one-in-a-thousand mistake that he'd just have to try and forget.

But he couldn't forget, or even learn to live with it — not until he stood alone with it. That was why he had come to the lake, to Canada. Up here they knew, they had seen, but it didn't mean so much. The CBC Radio generally reported only the scores of the Toronto and Montreal games, and if neither was a division winner, their national pride and polite contempt for affairs Stateside made them seemingly indifferent to the outcome. Yet, even if they hadn't been, he'd still have been alone. The skies of central Ontario threatened snow by early October, and it was late now, nearly November, although the snow had not yet fallen, and the lake was unfrozen.

There were twenty cabins around the main circle of the lake, and Buckton's was the only inhabited one. No one dared to water-ski or swim, and even the fishing became a challenge because of the chill temperature. The cabin owners, most of them business people from Toronto or Barrie, always closed up in early September and headed a few hours south, where the winters were only ten below.

So Buckton was alone, as he had wanted. The Franklin stove and the half cord of wood beneath the cabin would supply enough heat for a few days, and there was always the space heater. When the hydro had come in two years before, Buckton had felt betrayed by the tall poles and wires cutting back through the road, into his wilderness. But once it was in, he was glad for it. He had seldom been able to get up North in the past few years, but Sally and Janie Sullivan, Scoop's wife, had spent a few weeks each summer when he and Scoop were on the road with the team. It was Sally's place now, but when he retired, it would be his as well.

He tossed another stone into the cold lake, trying to decide what to do now that he was settled in, and looked across the water at the opening a half mile away linking the lake to the others in the district. On the map, Lake Osenawega looked like a loaf of French bread with a long, wide, slowly curving hook attached. The hook narrowed until it became only a

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thin line that eventually met another, smaller lake miles away. And there the map ended. What was ahead was mystery.

He would go down the lake, he decided, follow it down the stream and into that next lake, and then, who knew where?

The foldboat was under the cabin. He dragged it out, found the paddles leaning against the woodpile, and carried them down to his dock. As the tip of the boat entered the water, it splashed him slightly, and he shivered. The water was freezing. He would have to be very careful not to tip the boat. He went back to the cabin then, and put matches, some sandwiches, and a few pieces of fruit into a double-strength plastic bag, and changed into warmer clothes, paying special attention to his feet. Insulated socks went on first, then plastic bags, another pair of wool socks, then hiking boots. He added a third pair of socks to the food bag, thinking that if the boat sank and he had to walk back all the way around the lake, he'd damn well better do it with dry feet. He finished dressing, and took the food down to the boat.

The sun, half-hidden behind grayness, was only halfway up in the sky, and Buckton thought it might be near 10:00 or 10:30. He'd left his watch in the cabin's bedroom, hoping that living by instinct and bodily needs would break his summer habit of firmly adhering to schedules. He would watch the sun, he thought, and start back so that he could reach his dock before night came. He lowered himself into the boat, settling down onto the red flotation cushion with a groan. The pain in his back that had come in the fourth game on diving and making an impossible catch was still there. Buckton tucked the plastic bag of food behind him, screwed the handles of the oars together to make one long, two-bladed kayak paddle, and pushed himself out into the lake.

The steady stroke of the paddle, the ease with which the boat sheared the placid water, the drops falling from the upraised blades like strings of crystal beads — all relaxed him, gave him ease, and he found himself happy with the day, the lake, and his role in them.

It took thirty minutes to get to the hook's opening, and he saw instantly that the hook was wider than he had expected, two hundred yards (*meters,* he thought — *I'm in Canada now*) from one side to the other. He found that interesting, a discovery of sorts, and he smiled as he paddled down it, straining in quiet excitement to see around the next bend. It was all virgin timber here, thickly grown to the edge of the water so that the

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leaves of autumn lay on the hook's surface like other, smaller boats, drifted out upon the wind and brought by that same wind back safely to the shore, where the leaves floated in a thick mass that colored the water's edge, an immense flotilla of brown and red and yellow craft. From time to time, Buckton paddled in close to the shore, and let the foldboat drift through the leaves, spreading them gently apart and watching as they closed together again behind him, as though determined, in their fragile ignorance, not to let him return.

The hook went on, and he began to fancy it, not as the arm of a greater lake, but as a river, a thing unto itself. Now, when he looked back, he could no longer see the lake with the cabins and docks comfortably dotting its perimeter. He saw only *the river* behind and ahead, only the trees and bushes on the shore. *Passed from the sight of men,* he thought calmly. Except for himself, it was as though men had never been, that the world belonged solely to the trees, and the birds that he occasionally saw drift above him. It seemed so like the end of the earth that it came as all the greater surprise to him when he saw the cabin on the water's edge.

It sat back twenty yards from the water, and the earth surrounding it bore nothing but high yellow weeds and a few bushes that had long since lost their leaves, leaving only bare branches, like scrabbling fingers petrified by the windless day. Buckton paddled up to the shoreline and stopped, the foldboat parallel to the front of the cabin. As ugly as was the land immediately surrounding it, the cabin was worse. It was small, sixteen feet from one side to the other; the roof was slanted; and here and there on its surface, shingles lay askew, bent up toward the gray sky, or dangled from the eaves, like flaking skin on a psoriatic victim. Enough paint remained on the rough boards of the cabin's sides so that Buckton could tell it had once been a bright, florid red, but now only patches remained, and sun and wind had faded those to a sickly carmine. A heavy wooden door with a white enamel knob stood directly in the center of the cabin's face, flanked on either side by two windows that had long been boarded over. Buckton could see, even from a distance, the thick and rusty nails that protruded, spikelike, from the protecting boards. It looked, he thought, not so much like a house as like a disease-riddled face — the gaping mouth of the closed door, the blinded eyes of the windows, the leprous surface of the faded boards, all topped by that Medusa's fright wig of rampant shingles. Even the ground on which it stood, he thought, had

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yielded to its creeping sickness. There was not a healthy tree or bush or flowering plant for yards around.

Buckton paddled on, looking over his shoulder as the cabin receded behind him. He had the absurd feeling that if he turned his back on it for too long a time, it would shadow him down the shoreline, leaving desolation in its path. But it did not move, and was soon lost to sight around the bend of the water. Buckton kept stroking until his arms grew tired, then looked up at the sky. The sun was past its zenith, its yellow ball so occluded by clouds that Buckton could look directly at it without blinking. His stomach growled its hunger, but he decided to keep on until he reached the mouth of the stream that led to the next lake.

A mile farther on, he saw the railroad bridge. It was thirty feet high, and four pillars of rough-hewn and mortared stone held it above the water. As he drew closer, he saw, sitting on the base of the right-hand pillar, a man fishing, with a small tackle box beside him. When the man looked in his direction, Buckton waved, and the man waved back. Buckton paddled close enough to talk without shouting and disturbing the man's quarry. Now he could see that the man was old, in his mid-seventies, with a grizzled beard. An International Harvester cap sat perfectly level on his head, and he wore a brown canvas jacket, blue jeans, and worn but sturdy walking shoes. "How they biting?" Buckton asked.

"Pretty good," said the man, in a deep, vigorous voice. "Rock bass, mostly."

"Rock bass?" Buckton said, thinking of the dirty brown, hand-sized multitudes that made fishing from his dock such a nuisance. "They worth the effort?"

"Well, not in spring or summer, but around this time they start gettin' big enough to pop in a pan." He pulled out of the water a cage in which several dozen good-sized fish lay. "Fillet 'em and freeze 'em. They taste pretty good come March."

"You walk back in here?" Buckton saw no boat.

"Hell no," the man smiled. "There's a dirt road in, Railroad built it to fix the bridge every spring. Turns off 142 about five miles west of Studholme. Got a gas station there. Or my boy does. He does all the work now, and I go fishin'. Where you comin' from?"

"Lake Osenawega. I got a cabin there."

The old man raised his eyebrows. "Pretty late in the season."

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"Wanted to see what it was like before winter came." Buckton gestured ahead. "The stream mouth to the next lake much farther ahead?"

"Thinkin' of goin' down there?" Buckton nodded. "You're gonna have to portage a fair distance."

"I can't boat through?"

"Water's high enough for that in spring, no other time."

"How long's the portage?"

"Good three kilometers, maybe more."

"Well, forget that." Buckton frowned. By the time the ice thawed, Buckton would be well into spring training, if they renewed his contract as they had promised. He looked back up at the old man. "Mind if I eat my lunch here?"

"Sure, c'mon up. Just gonna eat a bite myself."

The old man steadied the boat while Buckton climbed out onto the rock base of the pillar. They sat together and ate, the old man's sole item a huge sandwich of what looked like beef engulfed by two slabs of homemade brown bread. He accepted an apple when Buckton offered it, and stripped the meat off as neatly as a machine, until only core and stem were left, which he hurled into the bushes on the shore. He introduced himself as Dave Coker, and Buckton told him his name as well, relieved when Coker did not recognize it. They chatted about fishing and the weather as they ate, and finally Buckton thought to ask about the desolate cabin he had seen.

"That's the cabin Ralph Terwiliger built for his boy Ben," the old man said with a frown.

"How'd they ever get back in there?"

"Boat. Took everything in by boat. Old Ralph didn't like people much — lived out pretty far. Figured his boy'd like the same thing. So when Ben went overseas, Ralph built that cabin for him as a surprise when Ben came home, only Ben never did. He got killed over there. So Ralph used it for awhile, then finally boarded it up and left it. Died soon after that."

"Who owns it now?"

"Nobody I know of. It's probably still listed with Realtors hereabouts, and I think there's relatives up in the Maritimes, but I never seen them down here. No one'll buy it — too hard to get to. Ugly place, too." Coker changed the subject back to fishing again, and told Buckton about a spot filled with walleyes, several kilometers toward the lake.

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He paddled blindly toward the shore in the thundering rain and darkness.

When Buckton thought to look at the sky, the cloudy sun was halfway into its descent behind the hills. "Jesus, what time is it?" he asked.

Coker tugged back his sleeve to reveal a yellow-faced Timex: "3:30."

"I've got to get going. I'll be lucky to make it back before dark."

"Be glad to drive you. Leave your boat here and come back and get it tomorrow."

Buckton considered the offer, which would mean driving back the next day and trying to load the foldboat on his rackless BMW, or walking miles of unfamiliar shoreline, neither of which seemed especially appealing. "Thanks," he answered finally, "but I'm rested now. I can probably make it."

"You sure?" The old man looked up, spat downwind. "Felt like rain all day. Maybe even snow. Cold enough."

"I'll be O.K. I'll hug the shoreline."

"Up to you." Coker held out his hand and shook Buckton's in a surprisingly genteel manner. "Pleasure to meet you. You get to Studholme, you stop by the Gulf garage and say hello. I'll give you a soda."

By 4:30 Buckton realized that he should have driven back with Coker. The sky had become much darker, and, even without the clouds, the day was dying far more quickly than he had guessed. The dim patch of gray light that was the sun had nearly fallen behind the western trees, leaving him in a damp and oppressive twilight. Buckton's thoughts were equally dim. The adventure of drifting down a tiny stream into the discovery of a new body of water — his Champlain fantasy — had been cruelly aborted by risen land, wet hummocks that he had seen as he sat and talked with Coker. *Even fuck up a boat ride,* he thought bitterly, paddling with tired arms, trying to beat the darkness.

Then it started to rain. He had hoped the gloom was only the result of the coming night, but the fat raindrops told him otherwise, bursting upon him with a cold insistence, scurrying beneath his collar so that he was forced to tug it tightly around his neck and press his chin down upon it. The rain increased until the surface of the lake was dancing madly, and he paddled blindly toward the left-hand shore, able to sense only its outline in the thundering rain and darkness. He wished only to land, to seek

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shelter beneath the trees, perhaps beneath the boat itself, and wait until the storm wore itself out, then try to paddle back to his dock by either moonlight or starlight.

He moved along the shore in near panic, searching for a place where trees did not reach out like thick-boled fingers to prevent his landing. He felt as though he were lost in a clinging gray sea that was coating his entire frame with its cold wetness. The light in the sky was nearly gone.

Then the clinging limbs of the trees withdrew, and Buckton saw ahead of him a thin strip of sand that shone dark gray in the deeper blackness. He gave a thin laugh, and pushed the boat toward the open sand until he heard the faint scrape of the bow gripping the tiny beach. Grabbing the plastic bag that now contained only a sandwich, the matches, and his dry socks, he straddled his way to the bow and vaulted out, landing gracefully on the wet sand. With a heave, he pulled the boat higher, until only its stern touched the gelid water of the lake. Then Buckton turned.

A face peered out of the storm, a huge face, larger than any beast's. Buckton gasped, breathing in rain that caught in his throat, so that he choked for a moment, long enough to recognize the wide, dark eyes, the gaping mouth, the dimly mottled skin. He laughed in relief and in gratitude at his luck.

It was the cabin. No windigo, no north woods monster out of Indian legend. It was only the cabin he had seen on the way up the hook, the one he'd asked Coker about.

Buckton hunched his body over the bag with his precious matches, and walked to the white-knobbed door. There was no need to run. He could not get any more soaked. The door was locked, as he had expected, so he drew back his foot and kicked beneath the knob. It held the first time, so he kicked harder, heard something snap, and the door moved inward to his next push. Buckton stepped into perfect blackness.

At first he thought it was merely an optical trick, but when he turned to look behind him, he could make out only a slightly lighter upright rectangle of darkness, like obsidian against black velvet. It was *too* dark, he thought. He should have been able to see *something* inside the cabin.

He turned again, and the motion made the rough boards of the cabin floor creak. It was not a sharp sound, but dull and heavy, as though the timbers were rotten with dampness, and Buckton wondered how high up the sand the lake rose in the spring when winter's snows had melted. The

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smell of it was rotten as well, a musty, sour odor that held more than wood rot and mildew. There were two reasons that Buckton did not immediately strike a match. The first was that creating a light would somehow commit him to the cabin, familiarize him with it so that it would be easier to remain, and he was not quite sure he wanted to. The second, and more irrational, was his fear that lighting the match would have no result whatever on the vacuum of ebony that filled the room, that the flame would cast its light outward only for a matter of inches, as if in some jellied, impenetrable fog.

He physically shook the thought from himself and felt droplets of rain leave his hair to fall into the depth of the cabin. After fumbling in the bag, he withdrew the watertight container that held the matches, then he unscrewed the lid and drew one out, scratching it on the striker. It burst into life.

In the twenty seconds before the first match burned down, Buckton surveyed an interior of mundane and abandoned rusticity. A rough stone fireplace occupied the back wall. Beside it was a large woodbox with no top. Against the left wall stood a board table with thin, straight branches for legs, and a single wooden chair with a ladder back. Three shelves were hung near the left-hand window. All were empty but for a few yellowed candle stubs. Against the opposite wall was a metal cot with a heavily stained blue-and-white-striped mattress. Buckton saw large patches of mildew of its edges. Above the bed hung a cheaply framed picture on the head of Jesus, the only decoration in the room. A small cabinet of rusting white metal completed the room's contents.

Buckton closed the cabin door and struck another match, lighting one of the candle stubs with it, and let the hot wax form a small puddle on the table into which he pressed the stub. There was some wood in the woodbox, old and moldering, but it would burn. With his pocketknife he feathered some of the smaller pieces and stacked them carefully in the fireplace. As he lit them, he hoped that the chimney was not clogged with leaves, but the draft was sufficient, and the room was soon warm enough for him to take off his sodden jacket and shirt, which he laid on the boards to dry. He sat by the fire in his damp and slowly stiffening jeans, turning his head now and again to look at the picture of Jesus on the wall. Though Buckton had not been inside a church in nearly ten years, the picture comforted him, if for nothing more than the quiet serenity of the face.

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After a while his buttocks began to ache, and he looked at the moldy mattress with a cautious longing. Finally he dragged it from the cot onto the floor in front of the fire, heaped a few more logs on top of the blaze, and lay down, his damp shirt keeping the pungent-smelling surface of the mattress from his face. He was asleep in minutes.

When he awoke, it was with the sense of not being alone, and in his semiconscious state, he wondered if owls lived in the cabin, coming in through holes where the stuff of the eaves had rotted wetly away, and if they returned with dawn. But it was not, he realized dully, the figure of a giant bird that stood dimly lit by the dying coals, but the figure of a man.

Buckton froze, unable and unwilling to move, thinking that it was a dream, no more, and that in another second he would wake and be alone. But he did not wake, and the figure in the doorway moved, shifted slightly as though in discomfort. A voice came, thin and tentative.

"Hello? . . . Are you awake?"

It sounded real, alive, and Buckton let out his held-in breath. "Yeah," he croaked, trying to hide the terror that even now had not totally left him. He sat up and squinted, but the man's figure remained indistinct. "Um . . . I've got a candle here." He found his matches and lit the stub so that the room blossomed with a pale yellow glow.

"Didn't mean to startle you," the stranger said. Buckton watched him in the dimness, guessing him to be somewhere in his early thirties. He was dressed plainly, and not warmly enough, Buckton thought, for a northern October. His height was an inch under six feet, and he was stocky, carrying the weight effortlessly, as muscle rather than fat. His skin was pale and clear, his hair a reddish brown. He smiled, just a little.

"Didn't expect to find anybody here," Buckton said a bit apologetically, wondering if the man had any business there, or if he, too, were only an interloper.

"Neither did I," the man said, closing the door behind him.

"Did you get caught by the rain, too?"

"No. I live here. Sometimes."

"You *live* here?" Buckton said, looking around the cabin's desolate interior, feeling something cold start to grow deep in his stomach.

"Yeah." The stranger crossed to the woodbox and threw some wood on the fire.

"Who are you?" Buckton asked, not sure if he wanted to know, expect-

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ing to hear a name, and knowing that if his expectations were realized, his sense of reality would be shattered beyond repair.

"My name's Ben Terwiliger."

A wild, high-pitched laugh left Buckton's throat, and the stranger whirled about.

"What the hell's wrong with you, mister?"

Buckton thought that if he kept laughing, at least kept smiling, that maybe he wouldn't be scared. "That's funny," he said. "Funny. But you're *not* Ben Terwiliger."

"Hell I'm not." The man straightened, but there was nothing threatening in his manner.

"Then the old man was lying."

"What old man?"

"Coker."

"Don't know him. Lying about what?"

"He said . . . you were dead."

The man who called himself Ben Terwiliger smiled. "That's what they think, is it? Well, that's all right. That's good."

"Wait a minute, just wait. Are you saying you're really Ben Terwiliger? And this . . . this isn't a joke or anything?"

"Why would I joke you, mister? I don't even know you. But I know who I am. Now, if you want to spend the night here, you just go ahead. I'll go back out where I was."

"No, wait, please. Look, I'm sorry. I didn't know anybody'd been using this place, and with the rain and all . . . well, I broke your door there, be glad to pay for it." Buckton babbled on, still confused, uncertain as to what was dream and what was reality, though this undoubtedly felt like the latter. ". . . and it's raining so hard that. . . ."

"It's not raining," Terwiliger said, and sat on the rusty springs of the bed. He said no more, only sat and looked at Buckton, who began to feel uncomfortable in his seminudity, and put on his remaining clothes.

Buckton expected something to happen any second — for Terwiliger to disappear, to spring upon him, to start laughing at the joke he'd played upon the Yank tourist, to fall away into a puddle of slime. But Terwiliger only sat and watched him. "Why," Buckton said finally, "do you want people to think you're dead?"

"It's easier. Then no one bothers me."

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"But why did you tell *me* who you were?"

"I'm not used to lying. Just to hiding."

"Hiding," Buckton repeated. "Why?"

Terwiliger gave a sigh that spoke worlds.

"Coker — the old man — said you were killed in the war."

Terwiliger shook his head. "I came home."

"Why? If you wanted to hide?"

"You hide in places you know best." He got up, making the springs squeal, and placed another log on the fire. Then he drew the single chair over next to the hearth, and straddled it, facing Buckton so that his face was in shadow. "I never told anyone before. Summers I stay back in the woods, away from here. Too many people around all the time. But in October I come back. To stay warm. It's hard to keep warm, especially in winter." He paused for a long moment. "There were eight in the squad, and I was their leader. I led them, all right. There was this minefield, and we went across it slow and careful, and found a few, and after a while we didn't find any more. And I asked Sooner if he thought it was all right, and he did, and so did I. And we got together for a smoke to celebrate getting across, and Gary pulled out his pack of Player's and stepped over the rest of us to share them.

"It was my fault. I was the leader. I should've known. They just disappeared, blew apart before my eyes. I had nothing. No squad, no more friends, nothing. So I came home. Back where I could hide."

"Deserted?" said Buckton quietly, thinking about making a way through jungles, across paddies, over an ocean and a continent to these woods.

"I came home," Terwiliger said. Then he rose and looked down at Buckton. "You stay here tonight. I'll go back out."

"No," Buckton replied. "We can both stay. Here, you want the mattress? I can sleep on the floor."

Terwiliger shook his head. "Keep the mattress." He lay on his back on the bare springs of the cot and closed his eyes.

Buckton thought he looked like a dead man. He shivered and lay down on the mattress, unable to close his eyes, to stop watching the man reclining on the cot. Or was it a man at all? he thought. Do men hide from other men, live alone in the woods like animals? His own error seemed small and insignificant, next to the tragic mistake Terwiliger had made, and for a time he felt at peace, just time enough to let him go back to sleep.

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When he awoke, the fire was only coals, but he could make out a thin slice of light underneath the cabin's door. He felt his way across to it and flung it open. The day was cold but clear, and a bright sun was partway up in the east. Buckton breathed in the biting wind, letting it disperse the musty aroma that coated his lungs, then, refreshed, turned once more into the cabin.

Terwiliger was gone. There was, as Buckton had expected, no sign he had ever been there. Buckton looked around the cabin again, this time opening the white metal cabinets only to find them empty. He put on the rest of his clothes, went down to the foldboat, eased it into the water, and paddled out to the middle of the stream.

In a few hours, he landed at his own dock and made himself a breakfast of eggs, sausage patties, potatoes, and thick slices of wheat toast. He finished packing and closing up the house by early afternoon, then drove out the dirt road to the macadam two-lane that would eventually put him on 495.

Buckton was not yet happy. The only lesson learned from his meeting with Terwiliger was that it was futile and destructive to withdraw from other men. Terwiliger's mistake did not expiate his own in any way. Nothing had changed. It was only chance that had led him to discover the truth about Terwiliger, coincidence that had brought them together. He could not be redeemed by a coincidence. Temporarily comforted, perhaps, but not redeemed.

Just outside of Studholme, Buckton remembered what Dave Coker had said about having a Gulf station there, and glanced down at his gauge. The tank was half-full, but Buckton decided to stop anyway. There was just a bit more that he wanted to know.

When he pulled in, a sturdy man in his mid-fifties came out of the station, snapping an oily rag in the air. "Fillerup?" he asked.

Buckton nodded. There was some resemblance to the old man, but he wasn't sure. "Dave around?"

"Fishing," said the man.

"You his son?"

"Yep. You know Dad?"

"Ran into him yesterday. Out at the railroad bridge."

"Oh yeah," the man nodded, "he mentioned that. You the baseball player?"

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Buckton nodded, made himself smile.

"Saw you play a couple years ago in Toronto."

Buckton nodded again. "Your dad was telling me," he said, "about a cabin on the hook off Osenawega?"

"Cabin? Oh, Terwiliger's place."

"Yes. He said that the son was killed in the war?"

"Uh-huh." The younger Coker was cleaning the windshield now. "Minefield."

"Do you . . . happen to know where he's buried?"

The man shook his head. "Oh, they never found the body."

"Yeah," Buckton said, certain now, only making conversation. "Those Cong mines were bad."

"Cong?" Coker snorted. "Weren't any Cong in Germany."

"Germany? But. . . ."

"You give me one good reason why a Canadian boy'd go to fight a Yank war, and your gas is free." Coker scrubbed roughly at a hardened bit of bird dropping.

"But *Germany* . . . that means. . . ."

"World War II. That's right. That's where Ben Terwiliger bought it."

"Forty years," Buckton whispered to himself, thinking of the man not out of his thirties whom he had seen the night before.

Coker had to repeat "$11.50" twice before Buckton took out his wallet. Something was storming inside his brain, a suspicion that sometimes, in odd places and on singular nights, things other than mere coincidence enter the web of life to shape and to teach.

He thought about it all the way to Barrie, all the way to Toronto, considered it without fear as he crossed the bridge at Niagara and went down past Buffalo, and ultimately exulted in it, as he drove straight on through the night.

By the time he arrived home, he was beginning to think about the green thickness of Florida grass, short sleeves, and white spheres against the sky.

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Most readers know John Morressy for his F&SF stories about the wizard Kedrigern (a new novel, KEDRIGERN AND THE CHARMING COUPLE, will be published in January). His new story is something quite different, about a clockmaker who comes to a town, bringing it marvels and terror.

Timekeeper

By John Morressy

A SINGLE LANTERN was the only source of light in the shop. Two men stood in the center of the room, spilling out broadening shadows across the floor and against the counter and the empty walls.

The shorter and heavier of the men, the bearer of the lantern, moved. Shadows swooped, and the floor creaked under his weight. He pushed a box into place, stepped on it, and reached up to hang the lantern from a hook depending from the ceiling. This done, he took a few steps to the counter. He blew a swirl of dust from the glass top and rubbed the surface clear with his handkerchief.

"It's only dust, Mr. Bell," he said. "If you decide to take this place, we'll have it spotless before you move in."

The taller man said nothing. With the light behind and above him, only a slight distance over his head, his face was obscured, and his expression could not be seen. The other man continued.

"You won't find a better location in this town, Mr. Bell. You have two

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nice rooms upstairs for your living quarters, and a large room in back for storage or a workshop. And there's the big display window on the street," he said earnestly.

"I'll take it, Mr. Lockyer," the tall man said.

"A wise decision, Mr. Bell. There's no property in this town more suitable for a jeweler's shop."

"I'm not a jeweler, Mr. Lockyer," Bell corrected him.

Lockyer shook his head vigorously and waved his hand as if to brush away his error. "No, of course not. You're a clockmaster. You mentioned that. Sorry, Mr. Bell."

"I make and repair timepieces. I do not deal in trinkets."

"You're certainly needed here, Mr. Bell. Do you know, if anyone wants a clock or a watch repaired, he has to take it all the way down to Boston? That's a long trip, and, more often than not, it's a waste of time."

"I never waste time, Mr. Lockyer."

"People are going to be mighty glad you came here. And you will be, too. You'll do well here, Mr. Bell," the smaller man said. He paused, smiling at the dark outline of the other, then he went on, "As a matter of fact, I have a watch you might look at when you're all set up. It was my grandfather's originally. Kept perfect time for nearly a century, that watch did, but last year I dropped it on the stone floor down at the railroad station, and that was the end of it. I took it to the best jeweler in Boston, and those people held on to it for nearly six months, and then told me they couldn't do a thing; it was beyond repair."

"Bring it to me."

"Do you think you might be able to replace the works?"

"I'll repair it, Mr. Lockyer," Bell said. "Take it to your office tomorrow."

"I will, Mr. Bell. I'll have the lease all ready for your signature. My men will get to work here first thing tomorrow morning. You'll be able to move in by the end of the week."

"I'll do my own cleaning and move in tomorrow. Just give me the keys."

Lockyer looked uncomfortable. "Well now, it's always been our policy not to turn a place over to a tenant until it's spotless," he said, looking around at the dusty surfaces and cobwebbed corners. "I appreciate your hurry, but I just wouldn't feel right giving you a place in this condition. It needs a good cleaning."

"I always do my own cleaning. Let me have the keys, and I'll be open

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for business tomorrow afternoon," the tall man said.

"You'll never manage that, Mr. Bell," said the other. "There's too much to be done."

"I know how to make the best use of time, Mr. Lockyer. Come by at six tomorrow, and your watch will be ready."

Lockyer entered the shop a few minutes before six the following evening. He was astonished at the changes that had been wrought in a single day. The windows, the glass countertop, and the display case were all spotless. The floors and woodwork gleamed freshly polished. The shelves were filled with an assortment of clocks. Some were quite ordinary; others were like none that Lockyer had ever seen before.

Bell was not in the shop. Lockyer went to the display case and stooped for a closer look at the clocks behind the glass front. The hour struck, and he was immersed in a medley of sound. Tiny chimes tinkled like tapped crystal; deep-tolling bells and reverberant mellow gongs vied with chirps and whistles and birdsong in a brief fantasia. Scores of tiny figures came forth to mark the hour each in its own way.

Lockyer found himself drawn to the capering figures of a Harlequin turning handsprings, one for each of the six peals of the little silver bell at the very top of the clock. The figure was smaller than his thumb, yet it moved with supple smoothness, free of the awkward lurching of the clock figures he had seen so many times before. At the sixth stroke the Harlequin turned its final handspring, bowed, and retreated inside a pair of gaily painted doors that shut firmly behind it. Lockyer leaned close, stooping, his hands on his knees, fascinated by the tiny figure's grace. He started at the sound of the clockmaker's voice and straightened quickly to find Bell standing behind the display case.

"I'm sorry if I startled you," the tall man said.

"I was watching. . . . I was fascinated by this," said Lockyer, his eyes returning to the clock now placidly ticking its way to another hour and another performance. "I've never seen a clock like this . . . like any of these."

"You must come again when the hour is striking, and see the others. Some are quite unusual."

"They must be very expensive."

"Some are priceless. Others are less expensive than you might think."

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Lockyer leaned down to look more closely at the Harlequin clock. He touched his pudgy fingers to the glass of the case in a childlike gesture, and drew them back quickly in embarrassment. Looking at Bell, he said, "How much is that one?"

"That one is not for sale, Mr. Lockyer. I've been offered a great deal of money for it, but I'm not prepared to let my little Harlequin go."

"It's a marvelous piece of work. Everything in the shop is marvelous . . . and you've set it all up so quickly!" Lockyer said with a frank, ingenuous smile. "It's incredible that you accomplished so much in less than a day."

"Would you like your watch, Mr. Lockyer?"

"Oh, surely you haven't had enough time. . . ." Lockyer broke off his protest as Bell drew out his grandfather's watch, bright and new-looking, and held it up for Lockyer to hear. The watch was ticking very softly. Lockyer took it, looked at it in amazement, and held it to his ear again.

"It will keep time for your grandchildren, Mr. Lockyer. And for their grandchildren, too."

Lockyer's expression grew somber, but only for an instant. He asked, "How did you do it? The watchmaker in Boston told me it was ruined. He said no one could fix it."

"There are very few things that can't be fixed. Perhaps I've had more experience than others."

Looking from the watch to Bell in silent wonder, Lockyer said after a time, "It looks brand-new. I must admit, I didn't think you could fix it."

"It was a pleasure, Mr. Lockyer."

The smaller man looked at his watch again, held it to his ear, and shook his head bemusedly. He tucked the watch into his vest pocket and reached for his wallet. "How much will it be?"

Bell raised his hand in an arresting gesture. "There is no charge."

"But you must have put a lot of time and work into this."

"I never charge my first customer."

"You're very generous." Lockyer looked at the shelves behind the display case. "Perhaps . . . you mentioned that some of your clocks are not too expensive, and perhaps . . . I'm sure my wife would be pleased with a nice clock for the mantel."

"Then we shall find one to her liking," Bell said. He walked slowly down the length of shelves, paused, retraced his steps, and at last stopped to take down a clock mounted atop a silver cylinder embellished with

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enameled swans on a woodland lake. He placed it on the countertop. The clock was silent; its hands were fixed at a minute before twelve.

"It's waiting for its proper owner," he explained.

He touched something at the back, and the clock began to tick. When the hands met at twelve, the cylinder opened, and, to the accompaniment of a sweet melody, a little dark-haired ballerina stepped forth, bowed, and began to dance. Lockyer stared at the figure in astonishment and murmured the single word "Antoinette."

At the last stroke, the tiny dancer withdrew, and the cylinder closed around her. Lockyer continued to stare for a moment, then he rubbed his eyes and looked up at Bell.

"It's uncanny," he said, his voice hushed and slightly hoarse. "We had a daughter. She loved to dance. We hoped that she'd be a ballerina, but it wasn't to be. She died of pneumonia two years ago."

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Lockyer. I hope I've not caused you pain."

"No! Oh no, Mr. Bell. That little dancer is the image of Antoinette as she was when we lost her."

"Then you have your daughter back. Every time the hour strikes, she will dance as she once did."

"My wife would be so happy," said Lockyer, his eyes fixed on the clock. He spoke like a man voicing his private thoughts. "She's never gotten over it, really. She seldom leaves the house anymore. But that clock. . . . I know it must be very expensive, but I'll manage to pay for it somehow."

Bell stated the price. Lockyer gaped at him, and at last cried, "But that's ridiculous! You could sell this clock for a hundred times that much!"

"I choose to sell it to you for exactly that price, no more and no less. Will you have it?"

"I will!"

"Then it is yours," the clockmaster said. He made a quick adjustment at the back, turning the hands to the proper time, and then he took up the clock and handed it back to Lockyer. "It's properly set now. It will require no further adjustment. I hope it brings pleasure to you and your wife."

"It's certain to do that. Thank you, Mr. Bell," Lockyer said as he backed from the counter, the clock cradled in his arms.

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* * *

THE CLOCKMAKER'S shop soon became a point of interest in the town. Schoolchildren and idlers clustered outside the window to observe the hourly spectacle. Customers came in increasing numbers, some to bring a watch or clock for repair or adjustment, and some to buy one of the timepieces that Bell sold at such modest prices. All who entered the shop stayed long, entranced by the marvels of workmanship that filled the display case and lined the shelves.

Lockyer was a regular visitor. At least once each week, usually more than that, he showed up at Bell's shop to report on the remarkable accuracy of his watch, to thank Bell for the ballerina clock, and then to examine the latest product of Bell's workshop. He was awed by the speed with which the clockmaker could create his marvelous mechanisms. Every week brought something new.

Late in the year, when Lockyer stopped in the shop on a rainy afternoon, Bell was placing a new clock in the display case. At the sight of Lockyer, the clockmaker smiled and set the clock on the glass top, extending his hand in welcome.

"Would you care to see it work?" he asked.

"Yes, Mr. Bell," said Lockyer eagerly. He put his umbrella in the stand by the door and came to the display case.

He saw a dark sphere, about the size of a cannonball. It appeared to be of crystal, so deep blue that it was almost black. Atop the opaque crystal was a small white-and-gold clock no bigger than a child's fist. The hands of the clock stood at one minute to twelve.

Lockyer studied the crystal, and could distinguish nothing within but darkness. The clock was exquisite, the crystal flawless, but this seemed a disappointingly simple timepiece to come from one who was capable of the intricate and subtle mechanisms that filled the shop.

As if he had read Lockyer's thoughts, Bell said, "It is not quite so simple as it appears." Lockyer glanced sharply up in embarrassment. Bell smiled and set the clockwork going.

It appeared to Lockyer that by the time the hands had met, the darkness in the crystal had softened somewhat. At the first stroke of twelve, a light appeared at the center. With each successive stroke, a new light glowed somewhere in the crystal, and all grew steadily brighter. The outer lights moved about the central one, brightest of them all, and smaller

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lights, hardly more than pinpoints against the rich blue that now suffused the sphere, circled some of the outer lights. Silent and serene, they moved in stately procession around the bright center. At the ninth revolution, the lights began to fade and the darkness deepen. When the twelfth revolution was completed, only the faint glow at the center of the crystal remained, and then suddenly it was gone, and all within was darkness once again.

"That's marvelous! It's . . . it's the universe!" Lockyer blurted.

"Only a representation of one small part," said Bell, lifting the sphere and placing it in the case.

"It's incredible, Mr. Bell. Incredible. Those lights . . . and the way they move . . . how did you do it?"

"I have my secrets. I thought you'd enjoy seeing this one, Mr. Lockyer. It will not be here after today."

"Are you actually selling that? Who could afford such a—" Lockyer silenced himself abruptly, more embarrassed than before. Bell's dealings were no one's business but his own; if he undervalued his own work, the fact did not seem to trouble him, or to do him any harm.

"I charged a fair price. And the woman who ordered this very special clock for her husband can well afford it."

"Sutterland. It can only be Elizabeth Sutterland." Bell nodded, but said nothing, and Lockyer went on, "Well, maybe I shouldn't say this, but it hurts me, Mr. Bell, it really hurts me, to think of a beautiful piece of workmanship like this clock being in the hands of a man like Paul Sutterland. He doesn't deserve it."

"Mrs. Sutterland seems to think he does."

"Elizabeth has forgiven him a hundred times, taken him back when he's done things. . . ." Lockyer stopped himself. He gestured angrily, and stood with reddened face, glaring at the dark sphere.

"Perhaps she loves him, Mr. Lockyer."

"If she does, she's a fool. I'm not a prying man, but I can't help hearing things, and if only a fraction of the things I hear about Paul Sutterland and that crowd of his friends are true, Elizabeth should have left him long ago."

"Things may improve, Mr. Lockyer. People do change."

Bitterly, Lockyer said, "Some people do. I know Sutterland, and I know that he'll never change, not if he lives to be a hundred."

"We must hope."

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Lockyer nodded impatiently and went to the door. He took his umbrella, put his hand on the doorknob, and then turned to Bell. "Look, Mr. Bell, I'm sorry. I had no right to say the things I said. I got angry for a moment. Elizabeth is an old friend. A lot of people in this town respect her."

"It's perfectly all right, Mr. Lockyer."

"It isn't all right. That's what troubles me. Sutterland is cruel to his wife and children. He treats his servants brutally. And to think of her giving him something so exquisite. . . ." He gestured helplessly.

"As I said, we must hope. Perhaps this anniversary present will mark a turning point for the Sutterlands."

Mrs. Sutterland arrived late that afternoon. She was a beautiful woman, her fine features almost untouched by time, her thick hair a glowing auburn; but years of unhappiness had left their mark in other ways. Her manner was cool and formal, and there was a tautness in her voice that served as a barrier to all but essential conversation.

The sight of the clock changed her. She folded back her veil and looked with unfeigned delight at the motion of the tiny worlds within the sphere. When the last light faded, she turned eagerly to the clockmaker, her eyes aglow, her expression animated.

"Mr. Bell, this is a wonder! I've never seen anything to rival it. My husband will be overwhelmed!" she said exuberantly.

"I'm happy to see you so pleased, Mrs. Sutterland."

"I'm delighted. It's quite beyond anything I expected, Mr. Bell." She placed her gloved hands on the crystal and looked into its dark depths, and as she looked, her expression hardened and weariness seemed to enfold her like a shadow. When she addressed him again, the barrier was in place. "If by any chance the clock should be damaged, Mr. Bell — we will, of course, take the greatest care of such a delicate mechanism, but children and servants can be clumsy — if some mischance should occur —"

"I will repair it," said Bell.

This town, like all towns, had its share of idlers and wastrels. Some of them were frequent observers of the noontime display in Bell's shop window, but, being the sort of men to whom punctuality was not so much a virtue as an imposition, they did not become patrons. Nearly a full year

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passed from his arrival before one of them visited the shop, and he came only to amuse himself at the clockmaker's expense.

His name was Monson, and he was given to this kind of amusement. He was a portly, florid-faced man with handsome features and a confident manner, well-dressed and well-spoken. He belonged to a prominent and prosperous family, though he himself showed no signs of industry or concern for good repute. He came to the shop one morning, spent a quarter hour examining the clocks on display, and then introduced himself to Bell. "People say you repair damaged clocks and watches," he went on.

"I do," said Bell.

"I've heard that you can repair any watch, no matter how badly it's been damaged."

"People have been satisfied by my work. Perhaps they exaggerate."

"Well, if you're as good as they say, I have a little job for you. It should be no trouble at all for a man of your abilities." Monson drew a dirty rolled-up handkerchief from his pocket, laid it on the countertop, and unfolded it to reveal a jumble of wheels, springs, and tiny bits of metal; a cracked dial; and a bent and battered watchcase. All were encrusted with dried mud, and the case was scored and scratched. When Bell remained silent, Monson said, "Too much for you?", and favored him with a bland smile.

"Perhaps not, Mr. Monson," said Bell.

Monson's smile wavered in the face of this calm response, but he quickly recovered. "It slipped from my fingers and rolled into the roadway. A horse trod it into the dirt, and the wagon wheels rolled right over it. I thought it was beyond fixing, but this watch has sentimental value to me, and so I kept the pieces. Then, when I heard everyone in town singing your praises, I told them I'd bring the watch to you and let you show how good you really are." His smile was a mocking challenge.

"Come back tomorrow at four," Bell said, taking up the handkerchief full of fragments.

"So soon, Mr. Bell? You work fast."

"I do not waste time, Mr. Monson, neither mine nor other people's," Bell replied.

Monson left, and when he joined the friends who had waited for him outside, their laughter could be heard inside the shop. The next day all three came at the appointed hour. Three other men, all well-dressed and in

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very high spirits, were also present, having entered only a few minutes earlier. They joined the others around Monson when he greeted the clockmaker, placed his palms on the top of the display case, and said boldly, "My watch, if you please, Mr. Bell."

"Your watch, Mr. Monson," said the clockmaker. He placed a small box on the glass and opened it. Inside was a spotless white handkerchief — Monson's own, as the monogram attested — which he unfolded to reveal a watch in excellent condition. The hands were at two minutes past four.

"No, no, Mr. Bell. You must have misunderstood me. I want my own watch, not a replacement," said Monson, shaking his head.

"This is your watch."

Monson took up the watch and inspected it front and back. After a time he said, "It may be my watchcase . . . either the original or a damned clever imitation . . . but even if it is my own, the rest of it. . . ." He put the watch down and shook his head emphatically. "I didn't authorize you to replace the works, I told you to repair them, and you said you would."

"I replaced only those parts that were missing," Bell said. "I repaired your watch. Mr. Monson."

"Nobody could have repaired that watch," said Monson flatly. "I handed you a lot of junk."

"You did indeed. Nevertheless, I repaired the watch. Do you want it, Mr. Monson?"

"Of course I do. It's my watch, isn't it? You said so yourself. But if you think you're going to charge me some outrageous price, you'd better think again. I'm on to that trick."

Bell quoted the price of his repairs. The men with Monson grinned at one another. One of them laughed. Whether Monson, or Bell, or the situation in which they found themselves, was the source of their amusement was not clear; but Monson did not appear to share their feelings. He took the coins from his pocket and dropped them with a clatter on the glass top. He took up the watch, turned, and stalked from the shop without another word.

Later that week, two of the men who had been with Monson came to Bell's shop. They looked over the clocks on display carefully and critically, and finally informed Bell that they intended to buy a clock for their clubroom at the hotel. Nothing on the shelves or in the display case was

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precisely what they had in mind, one of them explained further, but there were three that might be acceptable, provided the price was low enough. They pointed out the three, and when Bell told them the prices, they gaped at him in astonishment.

"What do you mean, asking prices like those?" one demanded. "There's nobody in this town can pay that kind of money for a clock!"

"I hear that if you like people, you sell them a clock for practically nothing. What's wrong with us that you ask so much? Do we look like fools?" said the other angrily.

"My prices vary," said Bell. "You saw how little I asked from your friend."

"Well then, treat us the same way, if you don't want trouble," said the second man.

Bell did not reply at once. Then, as if he had not heard the threat, or had chosen to ignore it, he said, "You gentlemen have chosen three of the most expensive clocks in my shop. I have others that cost much less."

"If we wanted a cheap clock, we'd go to the general store. We're willing to pay good money for good workmanship, but we won't be gouged."

"Perhaps I can show you something else. The clocks you selected are very delicate. I may have others more suitable for a gentlemen's club-room," Bell said.

They blustered a bit, but were mollified by what they took as his apology. He went to his storeroom and brought out several sturdy clocks set in brass and polished mahogany, with deep-resounding bells to mark the hour. The price of these clocks was absurdly low. The men examined them and selected one; but even as Bell was packing it carefully in a box for them, one of the men looked longingly at the first clock they had chosen.

"That clock with the little acrobat is still my favorite. Will you reconsider the price?" he asked.

"I set my prices very carefully, gentlemen. It is impossible for me to bargain."

"How does that acrobat work?" asked the other. "That's what fascinates me. I didn't see any wires."

"I didn't see wires on any of them. Be damned if I can figure out how those little people operate. What's your secret, Bell?"

Bell smiled, but said nothing.

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"Probably just as well for us to get a good, sturdy clock and not one of those others. They're interesting, but they wouldn't last long once things got boisterous down at the club," said one of the men. The other laughed, and said, "Even a good, solid clock like this one may not last long. What do you say, Bell — if someone bounces this off a wall, will it keep on telling proper time?"

"If anything happens to this clock, come to me," Bell said.

ELIZABETH SUTTERLAND revisited the clockmaker's shop in the spring. Bell was at the door, awaiting her arrival, and she waved to him as her carriage pulled up. She entered the shop with the light step of a girl. Folding back her veil, she looked around the shelves and turned to Bell, beaming.

"Mr. Bell, I came at a perfect time — you have a score of new creations on your shelves!" she exclaimed.

"I trust the clock you purchased last year is performing satisfactorily?"

"It hasn't lost a second. And it's such a pleasure to watch. It seems to be just a bit different every time it strikes. The children love it, and Mr. Sutterland is absolutely fascinated by it. He keeps saying that he intends to come here himself and tell you how much pleasure he's gotten from it."

"I look forward to his visit, Mrs. Sutterland."

"Well, I hope he gets to it soon. He seems so very tired lately."

"These are busy times," said Bell, ushering Mrs. Sutterland to the counter and seating her.

"Oh, it isn't overwork. He just seems weary. It's almost as if he's gotten much older in the last few months," she said, looking up at the shelves.

Bell did not reply. He followed her gaze, and then reached up to take the clock that had attracted her eye. He set it on top of the counter. She leaned closer, examined it, then looked at him and smiled expectantly. "It's a lovely scene, Mr. Bell. So peaceful. I can't imagine what I'll see when it strikes."

The hands stood at two minutes to three. The clock face was set in a gold dome that canopied a woodland scene; a still pond surrounded by willows. A rowboat about the size of a child's little finger floated near the center of the pond. In it was a figure in a straw hat, dangling a fishing pole in the water. All was serene. When the first chime struck, the fisherman pulled up a tiny fish, unhooked it, and cast his line again, to land a fish

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at each stroke. The three fish flopped and thrashed in the bottom of the boat. The fisherman took them up and dropped them back into the water. As the ripples spread and faded, he settled in his seat, tilted his hat against the declining sun, lowered his line, and returned to his fishing.

Mrs. Sutterland clapped her hands together in an innocent gesture of sheer delight. "That's wonderful, Mr. Bell!" she exclaimed.

"Thank you, Mrs. Sutterland," he said, taking up the clock to replace it on the shelf. "Is there any other you'd like to see?"

"I love them all, Mr. Bell, but I'm really here to look for something suitable for my mother's birthday."

"Have you a special clock in mind?"

"I was hoping you might have another clock like the one I bought for my husband."

"Alas, no. Each clock is unique," said Bell. "But let me think. I may have something more suitable." He swept the shelves with a slow, searching gaze, then studied the contents of the display case. He stood for a time, frowning, a finger pressed to his lips; then, excusing himself, he withdrew to his workroom. Some minutes later he emerged bearing a delicate white vase that contained twelve red rosebuds.

"A clock, Mr. Bell?" she asked.

He nodded, pointing to a small dial near the base, its hands at one minute to twelve. He set the clock going and placed it before Mrs. Sutterland. As the clock struck, a rosebud opened at each stroke, and a growing fragramce filled the air. She exclaimed softly in wonder and delight.

"Oh, Mr. Bell, it's absolutely perfect!" she said when the last rose was full-blown. "My mother adores roses. I couldn't give her a nicer present."

"I completed this clock only yesterday, Mrs. Sutterland."

"Just in time for Mother's birthday!"

"Exactly on time, it appears," Bell said.

Late in the summer, Paul Sutterland died quietly at his home. He was in his early forties, and showed no evidence of disease; but in his last days, he was a shrunken white-haired man, drained and feeble in body and mind. His widow mourned him sincerely, but there were many in town who counted her fortunate to be free of him.

In the fall, on a dark, rainy day of empty streets, Monson and two of

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his friends brought their damaged clock to Bell's shop. Monson stood it on top of the display case and stepped back, laughing. The others joined in as Monson pointed to the shattered face.

"One of the lads fancies himself a marksman, Bell. How long will it take you to fix this one?" he asked.

Bell took up the clock and examined it, turning it in his hands. His expression was grave.

"Well, how long? We want it tomorrow. You're a fast worker, aren't you?" said one of the men, glancing at his companions and laughing.

"Too much for you, Bell?" asked Monson. "If you can't fix it, we'll take another one to replace it. A fancy one, one of your special models this time," he added, gesturing toward the shelves.

"Those clocks are not for sale," Bell said.

"You're a hell of a businessman, Bell. You don't want to sell your best goods, and what you do decide to sell, you sell at crazy prices."

"He makes enough on the ones he sells to rich women. Is that it, Bell?" one of Monson's companions asked.

"Yes, what are you up to with Liz Sutterland?" Monson asked. "She spends a good bit of time here, some people say. Don't get any ideas about her, Bell, do you hear me?"

"Leave my shop," said Bell.

"Leave? We're customers, Bell. You're a shopkeeper, and you'll treat us with respect. We want to look over these precious clocks of yours, all these not-for-sale treasures you're hoarding, and you'll show us what we tell you to show us."

"Leave my shop," Bell said once again, his voice level and unchanged. He put down the ruined clock and took a step toward them.

"How about this one?" said Monson, moving swiftly to the shelves and picking up a creation of gold and porcelain and brightly enameled metal on which a single uniformed guardsman stood smartly at attention. "Don't do anything to upset me, now, Bell. I might drop it."

Bell's voice was calm and icy cold. "Put down the clock and leave my shop."

Monson looked at his two friends and grinned. He cried sharply, "Oops! Careful, now!", and feigned dropping the clock, laughing loudly. At his motion the figure was jarred and fell to the floor. Monson quickly replaced the clock on the shelf. "I didn't mean to do that. You should

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have just kept quiet, Bell. We didn't intend any harm."

"Of course you intended harm. And you've accomplished it."

The atmosphere in the shop had changed in an instant. Bell seemed to loom over the three men; and they, though all of them were more powerfully built than he, and some years younger, now shrank from him. He bent, very gently took up the fallen figure, and raised it close to his eyes.

"You can fix it, Bell," one of the men said.

"Yes, you can fix things like that easily," said the other. "It's not as if we hurt anyone."

"Don't bother about the clock we brought in. It was a joke. Just a joke," said the first.

Monson stepped forward and thrust out his jaw defiantly. His voice was forced and unnaturally loud. "Just a minute. Bell can fix that clock of ours, and there's no reason why he shouldn't. If I did any damage — any real damage — I'm willing to pay for it, as long as it's a fair price. We have nothing to apologize for. We'll pay, and that's the end of it."

Bell raised his eyes from the broken figure in his hand. "I will calculate the proper payment," he said.

The disappearance of Austin Monson and two of his cronies was a matter of general discussion and much speculation around town in the following months. Explanations of all sorts, from the ridiculous to the lurid, circulated for a day or two, then gave way to newer. But as time passed, interest waned, and soon the three vanished men were spoken of only by their friends.

In the year that followed this cause célèbre, Bell's clientele grew to include nearly everyone in town. Even the poorest family, it seemed, could afford to own a clock from his shop. And all his clocks, whatever the price, however simple or elaborate, kept perfect time. No customer was ever dissatisfied.

Bell was always available to a customer or a casual visitor, always willing to demonstrate some ingenious new timepiece. By this time, Lockyer and his wife had become regular weekly visitors; and every week, Bell had a new clock to display, ever more ingenious, sometimes close to magical. When the hour struck, one might see birds take wing or porpoises leap from a miniature sea or bats fly from a ruined belfry; woodsmen felled trees, skaters swooped and spun and cut intricate figures, a

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trainer put tiny lions and tigers through their paces, jugglers tossed Indian clubs smaller than a grain of rice, archers sent their all but invisible arrows into targets smaller than a fingernail; a sailor danced a hornpipe, a dervish twirled in ecstasy, a stately couple waltzed serenely while a quintet of periwigged musicians played. And never were the movements of these little figures awkward or mechanical, but always smooth and natural; no wires or levers or tracks could be seen, only graceful and disciplined motion, time after time.

Bell seemed to sell his clocks as quickly as he could make them. Even those that were not for sale left the shop, to be replaced on the shelves by new ones. Only a few were permanent. The little Harlequin whose acrobatics had captivated Lockyer on his first visit to the shop was still in place. The fire-breathing dragon on his hoard of gold and precious gems and skeletons in armor was still in a corner of the window, slouching forth every hour to the terror and delight of all the children. And a trim little pavilion of gold and porcelain and bright stripes of red and blue enameled metal, before which a single uniformed guardsman marched and countermarched every hour while a piper and a drummer marked the beat, stood where it had been for as long as Lockyer could recall; a year, at the very least.

During the holiday season, Bell's shop was a crowded, busy place, cheerful and lively. Those few townspeople who did not yet own one of his clocks were finally about to make a purchase, and others wished to buy one as a special gift for a relative or a friend. How he managed to do it no one knew, but Bell met the increased demand and even produced a magnificent new clock, a lighted cathedral with carolers before its steps and a choir of angels hovering over its spires. He placed it in the window three days before Christmas, and every passerby stopped to marvel.

IN THE cold, dark days of the new year, the mood of the town changed. No one criticized Bell or his work, or complained of his prices, but now the shop was often empty, no customers visiting for two or three days running. The Lockyers still came regularly, sometimes bringing their infant daughter. They noticed no change in Bell's manner and heard no word of complaint from him, but they sensed a difference that they could not explain to one another.

New rumors had begun in the clubroom where Monson's friends still

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gathered. Here they drank, and brooded, and their idle minds dwelt on the still-unexplained disappearance of their old companions. As rumors do, their stories fed on themselves, and interwove one with another, corroborating exaggeration with misstatement and validating both with falsehood. In time they became firmly convinced of their own imaginings.

Bell was the culprit, said the rumormongers. Why? Envy, of course. That was plain to anyone who knew the facts. Monson had shown him up, made him look foolish. The ridiculous clockmaker had thought himself a rival for the widow's affections — fancy a woman like her wedded to a shopkeeper! — and when he learned of her preference for Monson, jealousy added to envy had pushed him to desperation. Monson had put him in his place, and he had sought revenge. It was obvious. Just what he had done to his rival, and how, and why he had included others in his deed, was not clear — Bell was too crafty to leave evidence that would give him away; no one questioned his shrewdness — but he was the guilty party, that was plain to any reasonable person, and he must be brought to justice.

At first the townspeople laughed at these wild tales, considering their source and their probable motive. But they heard them again and again, and in time a tiny seed of something — not quite doubt, but perhaps a vague and reluctant uncertainty — took root in their minds. What was said so often, so earnestly, could not be completely without foundation, they told themselves. Not that they believed a word of it — but Bell was a mysterious man; no one would deny that. Where had he come from, and why had he come to this town? How could a man price his wares so erratically and stay in business, even prosper? Who bought those expensive clocks, and what became of the ones that were not for sale but nevertheless vanished from the shelves? How could anyone produce mechanisms of such delicacy and precision so quickly and yet so perfectly, and still turn out sturdy, serviceable clocks at bargain prices? And if it was indeed true that Monson and his friends had been talking about visiting Bell on the very day of their disappearance, then the clockmaker owed the town an explanation. No amount of good workmanship, not even genius, exempted a man from the common judgment, said the good citizens. The rumors grew more insistent, the issue more troublesome, the questions more pointed, as spring drew near.

One evening, when the shop was closed and the streets empty, Lockyer

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tapped at the clockmaker's back door. Bell was in his workroom, as he usually was in the evening hours, and he opened the door after a short delay.

"Mr. Bell, you must seek protection," Lockyer said without preamble when the door opened.

"I need no protection," Bell replied.

"You do," Lockyer insisted. "You must know the stories that are going around town."

"I have heard foolish rumors," Bell conceded.

"You and I know that they're foolish, but others in town are beginning to believe them. There's talk of coming to your shop and demanding an account of Monson's disappearance."

Bell's voice was unperturbed. "My shop will be open at the usual hour. I have always been willing to answer reasonable questions. Will you come in, Mr. Lockyer?"

"No, no, I can't," said Lockyer, drawing back. "But you must do something to protect yourself. Monson's friends are behind this, and they want to hurt you. They may break in on you in the night."

"Will the townspeople permit this?"

Lockyer hesitated, then lamely replied, "No one wants anything to happen to you. But Monson's friends have everyone confused. They have a lot of influence in this town; some of them do, anyway. And the people have heard so many stories that they don't know what to believe. They're confused."

"So I must fear the actions of a lawless mob."

"I'm afraid that's the case. You must protect yourself."

"I will, Mr. Lockyer," said Bell. Without another word, he closed the door. Lockyer heard the bolt slide into place.

They came to the shop later that night, eleven men strong. Others waited outside, at front and back. Several had been customers at one time or another, and some had come on occasion to observe the clocks as they struck the hour, or watched the display in the window. Three who had been present when Bell had presented Monson with his repaired watch were the leaders. The others did not speak.

"We're here to find out what you did to our friends, Bell. We're not leaving until we're satisfied," said one, planting himself in front of the clockmaker.

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"Why do you blame me?" Bell asked, looking calmly down on him.

"They said they were coming here. We all heard them say that. And then we never saw them again. You're the one behind their disappearance, all right."

"Just admit it, Bell. We can make you tell us everything, if you force us to," one of the others said. He raised a walking stick and tapped it on the glass top of the display case.

"We can smash this place to bits, and you with it," said the first. "Now, tell us what you did to our friends."

Bell looked down at him, then at the man with the walking stick, then at such others as met his glance. He raised his hand and pointed to the door. "It is best that you leave my shop," he said.

"Best for you, that's certain. But we're not leaving," said the first man, and several of the others, under the challenge of his ferocious gaze, murmured their agreement.

"Don't try to bluff us, Bell. You've bluffed this whole town for too long. Answer our questions, or it's going to get mighty unpleasant," said the second. He brought his stick down sharply. The glass cracked.

Then, suddenly, at exactly nine minutes past the hour of one, all the clocks in the shop began to strike in unison. Deep gongs and crystalline chimes, resonant bells and the sound of tiny drums and trumpets, music and birdsong and a din of indistinguishable pealings and tollings and clangings, all blended to engulf the intruders in a wave of sound; and on and on they struck, twelve times and twelve more and twelve times twelve more, rapidly at first, and then steadily diminishing in volume and rapidity, fading as if they were receding at a steady rate, becoming ever fainter until they could be heard no more.

The men stood benumbed by the assault of sound. They felt no pain and sensed no restraint by external force. Not one of them carried any trace of physical harm as a result of that night. Their breath came freely; they could move their eyes and hear every sound. But their bodies were held, as if the air had grown viscid and glutinous, clinging to them, dragging at them like thick mud or heavy snow, but a thousand times more inhibitive than mud or snow because, invisible and insensible as it was, it clung not only to their feet and legs, but to their hands, arms, heads, and bodies. They felt as if time itself had crawled almost to a halt, congealing and trapping them within it like insects in amber.

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Those who spoke of that night — and few of them ever did so, and those few reluctantly, after long silence, and still fearful of ridicule — agreed on several points. Bell, they all said, was untouched by the phenomenon. He removed the clocks from the shelves and the window and the display case, one by one, carefully and lovingly, and took them into his workroom. This process took some time, several hours at least, but none of the men felt the pain or cramping that such a long period of enforced immobility, or near immobility, would be certain to cause. Bell worked methodically, ignoring the intruders, his attention confined to his clocks.

On these facts all agreed, but each had his own particular memory of that night. According to one man, the shop grew steadily darker; another said that the light remained constant, but Bell himself moved ever more swiftly, until at last he moved too fast for the eye to follow, and vanished from sight; a third man claimed that Bell grew more insubstantial and wraithlike with each timepiece he removed, and at last simply faded into nothingness. One man recalled a sight of a fly that passed before his face so slowly that he could count the beats of its wings. The fly progressed no more than a foot; and yet the man swore that its passage consumed three hours, at the very least. One of his companions spoke of the disturbing sight of ash fallen from the cigar in the hand of a man standing near him: it fell to the ground so slowly that in all the time he stood confined, no less than four hours by his calculation, it had not reached the floor. Two other men mentioned their awareness of each tick of a clock, separated by an agonizing interval. One claimed a full hour's space, while the other spoke only of "a horrible long wait" between one tick and the next.

Whatever happened on that night, however it happened, when the men could move — and their immobility ended in an instant, without warning — Bell and all the clocks were gone.

Five men fled the shop in terror the instant they had command of their legs. Those who remained did so more from fear of showing fear than from courage, or even anger. They looked to one another uncertainly, awaiting direction, and finally someone said, "We have to go after him."

The workroom was dark and empty. They drew the bolt on the back door, and one shouted to the others waiting outside, "Did you see him?"

A man carrying a pick handle emerged from the shadows. "Didn't see nobody. Nobody's come out that door."

"Are you sure?"

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"Of course we're sure, damn it!" called an unseen voice near at hand. "What happened? Bell get away from you?"

They did not reply. They returned to the shop, and noticed something that had escaped them in the first shock of freedom. The shop was thick in dust, and cobwebs hung from the ceiling and rounded the upper corners of the shelves. The air was stale, like that of a room long sealed. As they looked around them, the clock in the town hall struck the quarter hour. One man looked at his watch and announced in a hushed voice, "One-fifteen."

No one ever learned what became of the clockmaker. No clocks like his were ever seen again by any of the townspeople, even those who traveled widely and took an interest in such things. Those that he sold have been passed on through three or four or even five generations. They keep perfect time, and have never required repair.

"OK. You're the ghost of Christmas present. Quite amusing. Now go away!"

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Terry Parkinson has had stories published in SHADOWS and in FULL SPECTRUM and has recently finished his first novel. This is his first F&SF appearance, his first that is, since at age eight he sent Avram Davidson a letter that was published in our November 1963 issue. "So, you see, it's been a long time coming, this sale."

The Shell

By T. L. Parkinson

AT FIRST, DANIEL thought it was the weather.

He and Helen had recently moved to their new lakeside house, authentic Early American. Daniel imagined that it would be humid by the lake, but it was not. The air was dry as a bone, as though the lake held all the water prisoner.

Daniel had tried some of Helen's moisturizers, but the skin on his face kept getting drier and drier. Soon it felt like parchment, and then began to crumble.

Daniel was staring into a mirror in his lap, carefully peeling layers of skin from his face.

Helen looked up from the garden, where she was pulling up clover that was strangling the snapdragons. "Must be old age, dear."

Daniel glanced up from his reflection; behind her was the slate-colored lake under the slate-colored sky.

"Dry skin, sure —," Daniel said, a little irritated by his wife's matter-of-

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fact tone. "But never like this." To illustrate his point, he held out a handful of the stuff.

"Throw that away!" Helen wrinkled her nose. "You hoard your dead skin as though it were gold." She returned to her gardening with renewed vigor.

"Say what you like," Daniel said, getting up and flinging the handful of skin into the air. The constant dry breeze picked up the pale bits of his face.

"Surely this can't be natural." Daniel's face felt pinched and hard as a walnut.

"Lots of things are natural," Helen said to the excoriated earth. "We're just getting used to this new place. You know — spiritually adjusted. Our bodies will come around soon enough."

Daniel stared at her placidly, knowing she was probably right. He felt a sliver of anger in his chest at her indifferent use of the truth. He probably should go into the dim house and get his mind off himself.

A flock of black birds rose from a distant tree and followed their shadows across the river.

"Helen," Daniel said finally, to penetrate the suddenly oppressive silence, "have you had any of your dreams lately?"

Helen looked at him; a brief light flickered in her eyes. "Not lately," she said, and gestured grandly at the house, the sky. "Now we're here."

Helen had been dreaming of water for months.

Following her dream had brought them here.

Daniel tried to stop thinking about it, but found he could not. He had stopped pulling the dry skin from his face, which was a sort of triumph of willpower, but the skin came off in sheaths nonetheless.

When he rose in the morning, he had left a white shadow on his pillow.

Helen refused to acknowledge the seriousness of the problem, and thrust her cold cream into his shaking hands.

"I know it's an affront to male pride, but use it. It'll help. See how nice my skin is." And she lifted his callused hands to her clear, moist skin.

He started to use the cream at night, sleeping faceup so it would not smear all over the place. He wondered how women did it, always sleeping on their backs.

The cold cream did not help. When he washed it off in the morning,

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there were clots of skin in the sink, mixed in with the soap and cold cream. And the pinkish new skin that the shedding skin had revealed was too painful to touch. His face had turned into a wound.

He stopped talking about the problem with Helen. She was vastly indifferent when satisfied, and would allow no intrusions into her happiness. And she had gotten what she wanted; they had moved to the lake, which he had never been completely in favor of. He missed his friends, the nights out with Tom and Stu; the noise of the city; and he did not relish the commute.

She had said the move would make them come together; their relationship had been going through one of those inactive periods, when it seemed that they had said everything they ever wanted to say to each other, many times.

Yet after a week the dull curtain dropped between them again. Helen grew steadily more silent and withdrawn.

Daniel often saw her walking along the lakeshore, her lips moving, talking to the waves, to the wind, not to him.

Daniel elbowed a clear space on the cloudy bathroom mirror.

He raised the razor slowly. His eyes filled with tears. Please, they seemed to say from the moist, unexplored depths, please don't hurt us anymore.

He was surprised and dropped the razor. A single tear rolled down his cracked cheek.

He put shaving talc on his face, which hid the two-day beard but not the red-fissured skin. He didn't have any important meetings today; his appearance didn't matter.

He stepped back, allowing the towel to fall from around his waist. He patted his knotted belly. He had been giving it his all at the gym lately, to vent the frustration about the things he could do nothing about.

When he removed his moist hand from his stomach, a four-inch square of skin stuck to his hand, like a wet paper towel.

He turned on the overhead light. Sure enough, the sloughing off of his skin was progressing to his entire body. There was a faint puckered ring around his neck, as though he now wore a suit of skin.

When would the suit come off? And what, he wondered, would he find underneath?

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"Maybe you were a snake in a previous life," Helen said, trying to laugh, but her face was a mask of pain. Daniel sat in the corner, red and tender as a newborn baby.

"No, no, no," Daniel kept saying. "I won't go to the doctor."

"Then I'll have the doctor come here."

"If you do, I'll go into the city and stay with Stu," Daniel said, staring at the pieces of himself lying at his feet.

Helen got up and paced. She stared out the window, looked back at him, then threw up her hands.

"Do what you like," she said finally, more softly, distantly; Daniel could tell she was thinking about the lake.

She went to the hall closet, rustled about; when she came out of the dark hall, her eyes had a glazed, imbecilic look.

"Here, try this bath oil. It works for me when I dry out — although this goes beyond any problem I've ever had." She handed him the green bottle, languidly. It landed in his tender lap.

The tips of his red fingers brushed her arm. She started, as a sleeper might when suddenly wakened. Catching herself, she patted him maternally on the shoulder, as light as a feather.

Daniel filled the bathtub with tepid water. When he lowered himself into it, it burned like fire. He swirled the bath oil around with an inflamed toe; the oil made a pleasant marbly pattern, then slowly fanned out and down, merging with the blue-green water.

Daniel lay in the tub for an hour, staring out the porthole window. Helen was pacing along the waterline, a black stick figure against the sluggish mercury-colored waves. A half-moon sent silver flames glinting on the lake.

Daniel closed the curtain, then quickly stood up. The oil pearled down his body, fell back into the water. The idea of water was suddenly repulsive. He must keep it out at all cost.

He turned on the heater full blast.

Strangely, he did not feel the heat. Just the pulling, the tightening of his skin, a vaguely pleasant feeling.

He threw his head back and listened to himself drying, crackling like paper — and hardening.

He felt like a child, hiding in a fortress.

* * *

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During the next week the shedding slowed, then stopped.

Daniel woke one morning to a healthy new skin. There was no incriminating evidence of lost skin on his pillow. He felt less tender, less sensitive.

In fact, as he appraised himself in the mirror, it seemed that the shedding had done him some good. He looked in the pink of health. His skin had a rosy flushed color it had had previously only after the most vigorous physical exercise.

"Helen," he said as she turned the flapjacks, her apron knotted up under her breasts. "I think I'm finally used to the place. My skin — feel it."

She held out a tentative finger, touched the rosy skin.

"Oh Daniel, I'm so glad. That's great," she said rather flatly.

"You don't say that like you mean it," Daniel said, deflating.

Helen looked up briefly from the griddle. "Your skin still seems a little hard. But I guess that a scab's forming. Soon you'll be as good as new."

A little bit hard? Helen had the unerring ability to undermine his good moods. A scab? He had felt cleansed, exuberant, full of himself.

His good mood flew out the window, landed in the lake.

"Damn," she said, "you made me burn the flapjacks."

When he left, he didn't even say good-bye, but walked slowly to the dock where they kept the motorboat. He did not relish the thought of being on the highway for an hour, while Helen's slow day unfolded, like the lazy movement of the lake on the stony shore.

He looked back at the two-story house they had mortgaged themselves up to the ears to buy, the swing on the front porch, the green shutters, the small bell tower without a bell.

He would row the boat out a few dozen feet before starting the motor. A quick spin around the lake, secretly; he would tell them at the office he'd had a flat tire.

He pushed off hurriedly, feeling guilty, feeling wonderful. The boat moved quickly, and he lost his balance. His left foot slipped into the greasy water. The water was cold, viscous like mineral water. It burned.

He carefully removed his wet sock and shoe. His foot and ankle were lobster red. Maybe he was rushing himself; his skin had been through hell, and would take time to heal, time he must give it.

When he was far enough from the shore, he pulled the starter rope. Nothing. He checked the gas tank; it was full. The day seemed to be

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working against him; but he was stubborn. He pulled the starter a dozen times, and finally the engine sputtered, spit out a cloud of black smoke.

Daniel shot onto the silent lake.

Skimming the surface of the silvery water reflecting the foggy sky, he was joyous, abandoned. He should be somewhere else. He left a foaming wake, breathed in the strangely neutral spray, cold, overpowering.

The lake was faintly musty-smelling — not dead, but unhealthy. Daniel knew there were few fish left, on account of the pollution. Daniel hoped he would not get an infection, where his foot had slipped into the water.

The environmental agency had assured Daniel and Helen the lake was slowly returning to its normal state, but that it would take time, because the industrial waste had flowed into it unchecked for almost a decade.

Daniel remembered coming here as a small boy, with his grandparents, and the waters had been teal blue; silvery fish had flown through the air. When he had returned as a teenager, the lake had been choked with green-brown algae, and smelled like sulfur.

He watched with pleasure as his house receded into the distance. From the center of the lake, the houses were all the same. Yet he had given up so much to call that one speck among the many his own. Doll-sized people sat on porches; smoke lazily curled from chimneys; dogs chased birds on the shore. Natural, everyday life: a life best viewed from this indifferent distance.

When he had almost reached the other shore, he could still see his house. He swung the boat into a tight arc and headed back. The boring drive was ahead of him. Might as well fall into that sleeping movement and go to work. People depended on him. He was nothing if not dependable.

Fifty feet from the shore, he let the motor die. He rowed the rest of the way. His house swelled to fill his sight. There was no sign of life; Helen had closed the kitchen curtains. He wondered if she had gone off to visit the neighbors, who had a small son named Ravi to whom she was becoming attached.

He threw the rope around the piling and stood up on legs suddenly wobbly.

The boat slammed into the dock with a dull thud.

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Daniel pitched forward, headfirst, into the waiting lake.

HE DIDN'T want to go into the house to change; he might encounter Helen, and have to reveal his guilty secret.

He kept a towel in the trunk of the car to dry off the dog when they went hunting. He removed his shirt, shoes, and socks behind the opened car door, and patted himself with the stained towel. He was strangely numb, and rubbed harder. Nothing. From the top of his head to the tips of his toes — nothing.

Was the dead feeling caused by the shock of the cold water to his new skin? Or some numbing effect of the pollution?

He had a spare suit and shirt at work. He threw the cold, wet clothes into the trunk, and began the long drive to the city.

As he drove, silence fell about him like a bell jar. He opened a window, but there was no wind. He turned on the radio, felt a dull vibration through his fingertips that must be music.

Suddenly angry, he slammed his hand down on the wheel. The silence lifted; hearing moved to the foreground. He heard himself clatter, threaten to break; felt it in his spine, in his teeth. He withdrew his hand, feeling suddenly fragile.

He looked down at himself (he was wearing only the cutoffs he had found in the trunk) — his shape was all right, and he could move; he was supple. But fear lanced from inside, echoing from the hardening walls. He leaned forward, to get away from his pounding heart, but the wheel stopped him.

A scab, Helen had said. That would account for it. He was forming a scab, undoubtedly accelerated by the accidental dip in the cold lake.

When the scab had done its job, and peeled off, he would be perfectly normal again.

He continued driving.

By the time Daniel got home that evening, he was in a mild panic. He avoided kissing Helen, wanting to spare her the shock, and himself the embarrassment.

He went directly into the bedroom and changed his clothes. He was standing there, one stiff foot in his pants, the other shiny foot on the shiny floor, when Helen opened the door.

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"What, no kiss?" She came toward him. "Didn't you wear your brown suit to work this morning?"

He circled around her like a wary dog, walking softly, then darted into the bathroom.

"Oh, we're playing games tonight," Helen said, her voice sharp with mischief. Apparently she thought he was playing cat and mouse — a prelude to a sexual encounter.

He quietly locked the door; she tried the doorknob once, also quietly. He heard her footsteps move across the room, hesitate, then disappear into the hall.

In the bright bathroom light, Daniel examined himself.

The pink flush of his skin was giving way to something else.

A pearly sheen, pink and white, with traces of blue, like tiny frozen veins. He rubbed his fingers across his chest, felt a leap of sound across hollowness.

Daniel wondered what he had witnessed, that he should turn to stone. But no answer came. Were his thoughts growing as unfluid as his body?

Yet, when Helen popped the door open with the screwdriver, her eyes glinting, he jumped with surprise.

She approached him boldly, and took his hard body in her arms before he could stop her.

"My God," she said, backing away. "You're growing a shell."

Daniel could hear Helen now only if he listened carefully. It was a matter of attention, really. When he relaxed, he would hear only a dull whoosh, which he wasn't sure was his own blood echoing in the shell, or the sound of the lake reaching inside.

"Daniel, we can't hide you forever. Something has got to be done." Helen's voice came down a long tunnel, reached him slowly, blurrily. She had returned from one of her long walks; a storm had come up, and she was soaking. Her loose blouse clung to her breasts.

Was she being deliberately erotic? It seemed that her libido had grown in proportion to the thickness of the shell. Helen loved a challenge. Did she prefer him this way?

Daniel stood at the window, saying nothing (speech was still possible, though difficult). Trees lashed about in an unfelt wind; the windows rattled; billowing purple and black clouds seemed to rise out of the

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lake, and sent sheets of rain pelting the shore.

"I don't know," Daniel said finally, a little frustrated that he could not know the storm in his usual way; he used to like storms. "If we go to the doctor, I'm afraid he'll try to remove the shell." His eyes winced with pain at the thought. "I don't think I could survive — without it."

"Well," Helen said coldly, peeling off her blouse. "I can't see what difference it would make."

She mumbled something, went to the bedroom to put on some dry clothes.

Daniel stared at the rain-splattered windowpane, his rigid face reflected there, and held stiff fingers to his lips.

Silence: silence can be beautiful. It was the first time he had allowed himself to think it. The thought struck like a lightning blot. I could get used to this, this cave, this clubhouse with me as its only member.

And he walked down to the shore in the rain, rain that never touched him, yet rain that he knew, was part of, like a hermit crab never feels the water around it, but accepts it as natural, as real.

He stood on the shore for a long time, simply being, without a thought, until the storm had spent itself.

"Who's going to pay the mortgage? It's due Monday. You haven't worked in weeks," Helen said, pacing in front of him. Daniel sat in the porch swing, immobile, staring at the silver lake.

Daniel felt Helen disturbing the air, but he didn't feel her presence acutely. The sound of the lake was a constant overpowering swell in the caves of his ears, surging, receding, drowning everything else out.

Finally he looked up at her. Was this Helen? Her indifferent attitude had become overtly hostile. She reached out suddenly and plunked his shoulder with a finger, hard, then balled her fist and pounded.

He smiled inside his mouth, but the shell kept the smile from coming out. Surely she was joking. He was so far away; she was so far away; nothing could come of this.

"Damn it," she said, brandishing her fist in front of his dreamy eyes, "say something!"

"I don't know, Helen." The words pouring like waves through his lips. "I don't know why this has happened. But can't we accept it, learn to live with it?"

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Helen's face filled with blood, and she turned away. She clenched and unclenched her fists on the porch railing.

When she turned back, her face was white, dead white.

"Get this through your thick head," she said. "If there's no money, there's no house. If the mortgage company takes the house, then we'll have to move back to the city. They'll probably put you in a home or something, and I'll have to get a job to keep you there." She said each word with a distinct emphasis, like unstrung pearls.

"But we could be so happy here. I feel it. Just give it time." Daniel held a hard, whorled hand out to Helen.

She leaped at him like an angry dog.

"Helen, be careful," Daniel pleaded. "I don't know what would happen if—"

But Helen had put the full force of her anger behind the punch. Daniel's face burst open. There was something pink and frightened underneath, squalling, trying to pull back into itself, to hide until its time had come.

"Please don't, Helen, don't —"

But she now had the strength of ten women. She put both hands under the shell.

Deaf to Daniel's screams, Helen began to rip away the shell.

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

HOT, COLD, AND CON FUSION

MY DEAR wife, Janet, is, for some reason, incredibly solicitous over my well being. If there's a single cloud in the sky, it's umbrella time. If a mist has faintly bedewed the streets, I must slip into my rubbers. If the temperature drops below seventy, on goes my fur hat. I won't even mention the close watch kept on my diet, the inquisitional cross-examination at the slightest cough, and so on.

You may suppose that I am very grateful for all this care. I put it up to any husband in similar straits. "Are you grateful?"

I thought not.

In fact, I complain a great deal about the matter, and I can be very eloquent, too, when I feel aggrieved. And do I get sympathy?

I do not.

To all my complaints, all my friends and acquaintances look at me coldly and say, "But that's because she *loves* you."

You have no idea how irritating that is.

So one time recently I was in a limousine being ferried a moderate distance to give a talk. The driver was a foreigner of some sort, who drove with perfect accuracy, and who was clearly intelligent, but he had only a sketchy command of English. Being aware of this, he took the trouble to practice his English on me, and I answered carefully and with good enunciation so that he might learn.

At one point, he looked at the smiling sunshine, felt the mild breeze, enjoyed the sight of the nearby park, and said, "It — is — vair byoot'ful — day."

At this, my sense of grievance rose high and I said, in my normal manner of speaking, "Yes, it is. And so why did my wife make me take an umbrella?" And I raised the offending instrument and waved it.

Whereupon the driver, choosing his words carefully, said, "But your

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— wife — she *lahv* you."

And I sank back defeated. The conspiracy was cross-cultural!

Which, believe it or not, brings me to the subject of this present essay.

Science, too, is cross-cultural, and so are scientific errors. I'm not talking about fraud, now. I'm talking about honest errors by capable scientists. An example I discussed not too long ago was the supposed discovery of N-rays in 1903 by a French physicist, Rene P. Blondlot (see THE RADIATION THAT WASN'T, F & SF, March 1988).

You may be tempted to think that such a thing, overexuberant excitement concerning a startling but perhaps dubious discovery, is particularly French. After all, we know the common stereotypical stuff about Gallic volatility and enthusiasm.

Nonsense! Such things happen everywhere.

In 1962, a Soviet physicist, Boris V. Deryagin, reported the existence of "polywater." This seemed to be a new form of water that was found in very thin tubes where the constriction of the environment seemed to compress the water molecules and force them unusually close together. Polywater was reported to be 1.4 times as dense as ordinary water and to boil at 500 C rather than 100 C.

Instantly, chemists all over the world began repeating Deryagin's work and confirming his results. Perhaps polywater played an important role in the constricted environment of human cells. Their excitement was intense.

But then reports filtered out of chemistry laboratories that the properties of polywater would appear if some of the glass of the vessel containing the water was dissolved. Could it be that polywater was actually a solution of sodium-calcium silicate? It turned out to be so, alas, and "polywater" collapsed as thoroughly as N-rays did.

You might say, well, Russians are volatile, too. After all, we know the stereotype of the "mad Russian."

So there's the case of Percival Lowell, an American of the purest Boston Brahmin stock (yes, one of *those* Lowells, who speak only to Cabots) and a first-class astronomer.

He reported seeing canals on Mars and made intricate maps of them. They met at "oases" and sometimes they doubled. Lowell was absolutely convinced they indicated the presence of an advanced technology on the planet, fighting to irrigate the desert midsections with water from the polar ice-caps.

Others looked at Mars and saw the canals also, but most astronomers didn't see them. Contrary evidence piled up over the years, and we

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all know *now*, beyond any doubt, thanks to Mars probes, that there are no canals on Mars. Lowell was fooled by an optical illusion.

Does that mean that startling discoveries are *always* wrong? Of course not.

In 1938, the German chemist Otto Hahn, who had been bombarding uranium with neutrons, came to the conclusion that the results could only be explained by supposing that the uranium atoms broke nearly in half ("uranium fission"). Such a thing had never been heard of, and Hahn chose not to risk his reputation by announcing it.

However, his ex-partner, the Austrian chemist Lise Meitner, had been driven out of Germany and into Sweden in 1938, for the crime of being Jewish, and perhaps she felt she had little to lose. She prepared a paper on uranium fission and told her nephew, Otto Frisch, about it, and he told Niels Bohr, who was on his way to attend a scientific meeting in the United States. There he spread the news and the American physicists at once scattered to their laboratories, ran the experiments, and *confirmed* uranium fission. The results we know.

Was that because Hahn was German and Meitner was Austrian? Not at all. I should tell you about the discovery of "masurium" in 1926 by excellent German chemists, but that's for another time.

That brings us to nuclear fusion, which is the opposite of nuclear fission. In fission, a large nucleus breaks apart into two halves. In fusion, two small nuclei join together into a single larger one.

Fission, in a way, is easy. Some large atoms are on the point of dissolution anyway. The short-range strong nuclear force barely reaches across them, and their natural vibrations constantly keep them at the point of fissioning. In fact, uranium atoms experience spontaneous fission every once in a long while.

If you add a little energy to the nucleus, fission can take place at once, especially where the atoms are really close to the edge, as is the case with uranium-235. You fire a neutron at it. The uncharged neutron is not repelled by the positively charged nucleus. The neutron slips into the large nucleus, and the added instability that results fissions the atom at once.

Fusion is more complicated. Two small nuclei must be brought very close together if they are to cling to each other and fuse. All nuclei, however, are positively charged and repel each other. Getting them to be sufficiently close to each other for fusion is an enormous and all but impossible task, it would seem.

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Yet fusion takes place in the Universe and is even extremely common. It will take place in any piece of matter, spontaneously, as long as that piece of matter is: a) mostly hydrogen, and b) sufficiently massive, about 1/5 the mass of the Sun or more.

The nearest place in the Universe where nuclear fusion takes place in massive quantities is at the core of our own Sun.

How does it happen? For one thing, the core of the Sun (or of any ordinary star like the Sun) is at a temperature of millions of degrees. At such temperatures, atoms are broken down and the bare nuclei are exposed. That is important because in ordinary atoms, like those that surround us, atoms possess electrons in the outskirts and these electrons act like bumpers that keep the nuclei from approaching each other.

What's more, at the high temperatures at the core of the Sun, the nuclei are moving at enormous speeds, far more rapidly than they can move as part of the ordinary atoms about us. The more rapidly they move, the more energetic they are, and at the temperature of the Sun's core, the nuclei are energetic enough to overcome their mutual repulsions so that they can slam into each other forcefully.

In addition, the huge gravitational field of the Sun causes the outer layers to weigh down upon the core and force those bare nuclei so close together that the density of the core is thousands of times the ordinary matter about us.

In very dense matter like that of the core of the Sun, speeding nuclei have less of a chance to miss. Even if they veer away from one nucleus, they may veer right into the next. Consequently both high temperature *and* high density encourage fusion. The higher the one is, the lower the other need be; and the lower the one, the higher the other must be.

In order to bring about fusion, we must have certain combinations of temperature and density and maintain them for a sufficiently long time. The necessary values of temperature, density, and time are known. It is only necessary to attain them all simultaneously.

Since under even the most favorable circumstances, very high temperatures are required, this is called "hot fusion."

Can hot fusion be brought about on Earth? Of course!

We have been doing it for thirty-five years in something called the hydrogen bomb, which is actually a nuclear fusion bomb. It is only necessary to have some fusible substance and produce the necessary

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temperature and pressure for fusion by use of a nuclear fission bomb (the ordinary A-bomb of Hiroshima) as the trigger.

At this point let me explain that there are three isotopes of hydrogen. There is ordinary hydrogen (hydrogen-1) with a nucleus made up of one proton; deuterium (hydrogen-2) with a nucleus made up of one proton and one neutron; and tritium (hydrogen-3) with a nucleus made up of one proton and two neutrons.

Deuterium is easier to fuse than ordinary hydrogen is, and tritium is easier still. Ordinary hydrogen is by far the most common type, and it is that which fuses at the center of the Sun, but that is too difficult to imitate on Earth. We ought to use tritium, but that is radioactive, breaks down in a period of a few years, and has to be constantly manufactured. Its use as pure fusible material is impractical.

What is done in fusion bombs (I don't know the details, obviously, and I don't want to know) is to use deuterium, which is rare, but available in quantity just the same. Apparently, a bit of tritium is also added. The fission bomb triggers the tritium fusion with deuterium, and that produces enough heat to trigger the more difficult fusion of deuterium with itself.

Recently, it turned out that our nuclear plants producing tritium have been leaking radioactivity into the environment for years. The government, however, anxious to "keep America strong" has kept this secret and let it go on, since to them it didn't matter what happened to the American people as long as America in the abstract was kept strong. (Do you understand that? Frankly, I don't.)

Now the tritium plants are shut down because some busybody couldn't stand it anymore and made the leaks public. This means supplies of tritium are slowly dwindling and when they're gone, we won't be able to explode our H-bombs anymore, unless we build new plants to make tritium, which will apparently take many years and cost many billions of dollars.

All of this, however, is beside the point. We're not interested in hydrogen bombs, at least not in this essay. The question is whether there is any way of bringing about nuclear fusion in a controlled way, *without* a Fission bomb trigger and *without* an all-out devastating explosion.

What we want is to fuse a little bit of hydrogen and use the energy this produces to fuse a little bit more and so on — always just a little bit at a time so that we risk no explosions. Not all the energy will be needed to continue the fusion, and the excess we can use

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for ourselves. Nuclear fusion would be a source of clean energy that would last us for as long as the Earth does.

To do this we have to get the right combination of density and temperature maintained for the proper length of time. Nothing we can possibly do now or in the foreseeable future will enable us to make the deuterium we're heating very dense, so we have to make up for that by reaching a temperature far in excess of that at the Sun's core. Instead of something over 10 million degrees, we need something over 100 million degrees.

For nearly forty years, physicists have been trying to obtain the necessary conditions by keeping deuterium gas penned in by strong magnetic fields while the temperature is sent up. Or else solid deuterium is zapped from a number of sides simultaneously by powerful laser beams that will heat it to the necessary temperature so quickly that the atoms have no time to move away.

But they haven't succeeded. Not yet. Huge devices costing many millions of dollars have not quite gotten deuterium to the fusion ignition point.

Is there any other way of initiating fusion? The crucial point is to get the deuterium nuclei sufficiently close together for a sufficiently long time, and then they'll spontaneously fuse and give off energy. The only purpose of very high temperature is to force the nuclei close together against their own mutual repulsion.

But can we trick deuterium nuclei into getting together *without* heat? Can we do it in some ingenious way at room temperature? That would be "cold fusion." Let's consider —

Ordinary deuterium atoms are electrically neutral overall, the negatively charged electron exactly balancing their positively charged proton in the nucleus so that two hydrogen atoms can make contact without trouble. The protons of the two nuclei are then about an atom's diameter (about a hundred millionth of a centimeter) apart.

Every particle has its wave aspects, so that each proton can be considered a wave, with the "particle aspect" anywhere along the wave. (This can't be described properly except with mathematics, but for our purposes we can make use of the wave image.) The likelihood of the particle being at a particular part of the wave depends on the intensity of that part. The center of the wave is most intense, and it fades off, or damps, quickly with distance. This means that the proton particle is usually near the

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center of the wave, though it can sometimes be off center.

In fact, each proton may be far enough away from the center, in each other's direction, so that they may find themselves in actual contact and fuse. (This is called a "tunnel effect" because a particle seems to tunnel through an *apparently* impassable barrier because of its wave properties.) However, when two protons are an atom's diameter apart, the chance of tunneling is so remote that I doubt that a significant number of such fusions have taken place in the entire history of the Universe.

But what if we make the atom smaller? The electron has an associated wave (I'm still using the wave image), and it can only get so close to the proton that a single electron wave circles the proton. The electron cannot get any closer than that. That is the minimum size of a normal hydrogen atom, and it just isn't small enough for fusion.

There is, however, a particle called a muon, which is exactly like an electron in every respect but two. One point of difference is the mass. The muon is 207 times as massive as an electron. That means that the wave associated with it is correspondingly shorter than that of an electron. A muon can replace an electron in a hydrogen atom, but because of its shorter wave, it can get much closer to the nucleus. Indeed, "muonic-deuterium" has only one-hundredth the diameter of an ordinary atom, and because the muon has exactly the negative charge of an electron, muonic-deuterium is electrically neutral overall and two muonic-deuterium atoms can be in contact without trouble.

Under such circumstances, the two protons are close enough together for the tunneling effect to work easily, and fusion can take place at room temperature.

Is there a catch? Of course! The second difference between a muon and an electron is that the muon is not stable. Whereas an electron left to itself would last forever, unchanged, a muon breaks down to an electron and a couple of neutrinos in about a millionth of a second, so there isn't much time for fusion to take place. Muon-catalyzed cold fusion is possible, but totally impractical, barring some unforeseeable breakthrough. Too bad!

Anything else?

Well, hydrogen atoms are the smallest known, and they can sometimes sneak into crystals of larger atoms and find homes in the interstices. The champion case of this involves palladium, one of the platinum-like metals. Palladium can

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absorb nine hundred times its own volume of hydrogen, or deuterium, at room temperature.

The deuterium atoms, by the time they are done flooding into the palladium, are much closer together than they would be in ordinary deuterium gas. What's more, they are held in place by the palladium atoms quite tightly so they can't move around.

The question is whether they are forced *so* closely together that the tunneling effect can become large enough to detect and whether cold fusion may then take place at a useful rate. Two chemists thought it worth checking out. They were B. Stanley Pons of the University of Utah and Martin Fleischmann of the University of Southampton, England. They spent five and a half years trying to get cold fusion with simple electrolytic cells that any skillful chemistry student might have set up. They spent a hundred thousand dollars they raised themselves, and here is what they did.

They began with a container of heavy water (H_2O with deuterium atoms rather than ordinary hydrogen atoms). They added a bit of lithium to react with the heavy water and create ions that would carry an electric current. They then passed the electric current through the solution with two electrodes stuck into it, one of platinum and one of palladium. The electric current split the heavy water into oxygen and deuterium and the deuterium was absorbed by the palladium. More and more of the water was split, more and more of the deuterium was formed and absorbed by the deuterium, until, finally, cold fusion took place.

How did they know cold fusion took place? Well, the palladium electrode developed four times as much heat as was being put into the system. That heat had to come from somewhere, and, since it couldn't come from anything else they could think of, they decided it was coming from cold fusion.

Very well. Pons and Fleischmann are legitimate scientists of considerable attainments and have good track records. They have to be treated with respect.

BUT —

If anyone finds practical cold fusion and is the first one in the field with it, they are instantly and at once the most famous chemists in the world, a cinch for an immediate Nobel Prize, and if they file for patents, they will become incredibly rich. Naturally, then, Pons and Fleischmann wouldn't be human if they didn't *want*, with unimaginable intensity, to be right. As soon as they had any respectable sign of its presence, wouldn't they decide they had it, even if perhaps

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they didn't? Human nature is human nature.

Should they have waited until they were *really* sure, till they had overwhelming evidence? For such a startling and unprecedented claim, scientific caution would direct them to wait, but it's easy to advise such caution and very hard to accept it.

After all, nothing would come of it for Pons and Fleischmann personally, unless they were first in the field. There's nothing very outré in the experiment. Scientists knew about this trick of palladium; they understood about tunneling; they grasped muonic-catalysis; and they were prepared to set up electrolytic cells. Who could say, then, how many chemists or physicists might quietly be working in the direction of palladium-catalyzed cold fusion? Indeed, Pons and Fleischmann knew for sure there were people at Brigham Young University who were working in that direction.

Apparently, the two groups agreed to send papers simultaneously to *Nature*, a very respected journal, on March 24, 1989. However, Pons and Fleischmann apparently could not resist establishing priority. They stole a march by holding a news conference on March 23 and spilling the beans to the press.

This got scientists (physicists especially) furious, for a number of reasons.

1) Giving an important scientific discovery to the press is not the right way to do it. It should be written up as a detailed scientific paper, sent to a scientific journal, submitted to peer review, revised if necessary, and then be published. This sounds very academic and roundabout, but it is the only way to keep science on track. What Pons and Fleischmann have done is to put a premium on appealing to the public with work that may be incomplete or ambiguous. If this became the fashion, science would break down in confusion.

2) Pons and Fleischmann did not give full details of the process, which is also the non-scientific thing to do. Naturally, every scientist wanted to test the experiment for himself to see if he could confirm it or find out something else about it (that was what happened in the case of uranium fission). They couldn't be sure of what they were doing, however, because of the incompleteness of the data. Even when Pons and Fleischmann finally submitted a paper to *Nature*, it was so incomplete that *Nature* asked for additional details, and Pons and Fleischmann refused.

3) Pons and Fleischmann apparently didn't run proper controls. They did not describe having done the experiment with ordinary water.

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Even if deuterium fused under the conditions given, ordinary hydrogen would not, and that should have been tested. If the experiment developed heat with ordinary hydrogen also, then the source would surely have been something else, not fusion.

4) Pons and Fleischmann reported as their major evidence for fusion the development of heat, but heat can develop from *any* source; it is the common product of all conceivable forms of energy. It isn't enough to say: it can't be this, it can't be that, so it must be fusion. This sort of negative evidence falls down because it might also be some nonfusion process that you just haven't happened to think of or to know of. What is needed is some observation that is positive for fusion and not something that is negative for other things. For instance, if the deuterium atoms fused, they ought to have formed neutrons of tritium or possibly helium-4. This was not reported.

The Brigham Young people did indeed report neutrons but only about one hundred-thousandth as many as those required to produce the heat reported by Pons and Fleischmann. There were so few, in fact, that it would be hard to demonstrate that they weren't derived from neutrons that are always hanging about the environment anyway.

5) Immediately after the announcement, the governor of Utah asked for millions of dollars from the federal government to develop practical fusion in Utah, before the Japanese could steal the notion and develop it in Japan. This lent an unpleasant commercial touch and stressed the economic motivation for haste and incompleteness in the science involved.

6) A gathering of chemists had a field day when Pons and Fleischmann implied they had come to the rescue of the physicists by doing for next to nothing what the physicists had been unable to do for many millions of dollars. There was no need to make fun of honest and rational work. The physicists, being only human, snarled in their turn at the chemists, and what should have been a scientific discussion became a rather unpleasant name-calling piece of scientific pathology.

In any case, I am writing ten weeks after the original announcement. Increasingly, it looks as though the Pons-Fleischmann report will *not* be confirmed; that it will fade away as did the Martian canals, N-rays, and polywater. Too bad, for the world could surely use practical cold fusion.

But, to end on a positive note. All the returns aren't in yet. There

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is still an outside chance, a very outside chance, that cold fusion will be confirmed. By the time this essay appears, we should know absolutely, one way or the other.

And second, even if Pons-Fleischmann turns out to be chimera and a mirage, an enormous effort is being put into investigating electrolytic cells with palladium electrodes, and who knows what people may find out as a result? Something interesting perhaps. Perhaps even cold fusion by some other route. I certainly hope so, though I must admit I wouldn't bet on it even with generous odds in my favor.

NOTE: It is now four months since I wrote the article. I doubt that *anyone* accepts Pons-Fleischmann cold fusion now.

Coming Soon

Next month: Two compelling novelets: "The Cold Cage," science fiction by Ray Aldridge and "Bestseller" a fantasy from Michael Blumlein.

Soon: New fiction from Bradley Denton, Harry Turtledove, Esther M. Friesner, Ian Watson, Kit Reed, Alan Dean Foster, Bruce Sterling and many others.

The February issue is on sale January 2.

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Judith Moffett wrote "Surviving" (June 1986) and a well received novel, PENTERRA. She makes a welcome return to these pages with a resonant story about Len Flint, who comes home for the holidays haunted by the ghosts of Christmas Past.

I, Said the Cow

By Judith Moffett

THE LITTLE BOY sat alone in the empty lobby of the Holiday Inn. Len, waiting for the desk clerk to finish with the customer in front of him, was exasperated to notice that the boy appeared to be crying; if there was anything he despised — well, maybe not despised, but truly scorned — it was a cry-baby. He made an impatient noise, looked away, looked back. The kid was definitely bawling. Or not bawling, exactly. He sat straight in the straight chair — scooted well back, so that his feet dangled short of the floor — and sobbed, not loudly, but with a relentless regularity that sounded as if he could keep it up till morning. His sobs carried clearly above the smarmy strains of "O Little Town of Bethlehem," courtesy of Muzak.

"Can I help you?" Len heard the desk clerk say.

He took a step forward to lean against the counter, whose sharp edge bit deeply into his down jacket, and dropped his keys with a clunk. "Have you got a single for tonight?"

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"I expect so. . . . Can't have people going around saying there was no room in the Inn, can we?" The clerk cackled briefly at his own wit and glanced at Len, who managed a strained, hypocritical smile, before bending his bald head to consult his charts. "Come a long way today?"

"Long enough." He accepted a pen and began to fill out the registration card. A passing semi had nearly swerved into him half an hour before; he wished the clerk would shut up. "Sorry, I don't know my license number. Do you want me to go out and get it?"

"No, no, no, that's all right. Just put down the state, and the make, model, and color."

Len printed BLUE TOYOTA TERCEL, PA '84, and signed his name: Leonard Flint. Then, while the clerk fussed with the credit-card machine, he jammed his hands deep in his deep pockets and turned his back to him, hoping to discourage further pleasantries.

Except for the lights, all blue, of a bristly silver Christmas tree, the lobby of the motel was dark and vacant. There was a large fireplace with several deep chairs grouped around it. At a little distance from this potentially cozy and inviting arrangement, a line of straight chairs stood against a wall in shadow. On one of these sat the weeping child. Tears slipped steadily down the boy's cheeks while Len stared, and he steadily produced the low keening sound that scraped like claws upon the chalkboard of the man's exhausted nerves. Len scowled ferociously. What a sissy. Where in hell were the hapless kid's parents? Why didn't they come and haul him out of there? The boy was wearing jeans and a light-colored T-shirt; the logs lay in the fireplace unlit; the big room was too chilly for those thin, bare arms.

Len sucked his teeth and swung back to face the clerk, who — finished at last — promptly handed him a key. "Room 241. Drive all the way around to the back, and it's on the second level."

"Thanks." Len slid the credit card back into its slot and stuffed his wallet into his pants and the room key into his coat pocket. He made a fist around the lump of his own ring of keys and took a step toward the door.

"Heading home for the holidays, are you?"

"No." He shook his head, smiling again to blunt the edge of this shortness, and, striding to the door, hit the panic bar with both hands.

It wasn't a lie. He never thought of his parents' home as "home," though

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he had grown up there, and his mother used the word as a matter of course: "When are you coming home?" "You haven't been home in such a long time."

In his room, Len lay in the dark in his flannel pajamas, sleepless. It would end with his taking a Valium — it always did — but first he would grimly give nature a chance to take its course. Driving "home" for a visit, he always had insomnia. On each night spent beneath the roof of his childhood home, he would barter one Valium for six hours of unrestful sleep; the drug would push him beneath the surface of consciousness just that long before anxiety buoyed him up into the light again, like a corpse lifted out of bottom muck to the surface by the gases of decomposition. . . .

Len rolled over, groaning. Visiting his parents was difficult at any time, but especially so at the Christmas season. Too many poisonous emotions in the air at Christmas, too many unvoiced accusations, too much unexpressed and inadmissible anger and pain.

Again he saw the rear end of the semi swing across in dim light, inches from his left front fender at sixty miles an hour.

His parents were getting on in years — that was the rub; that was what had dragged him three hundred perilous miles across the Pennsylvania mountains against his will, under a sky that had threatened snow all day. They were getting old, and he felt unable to deny his mother's wish to see him; he could remember having loved his mother when he was small. She had done her best to make Christmas fun despite his father's grumpy, Scrooge-like refusal to help. Len clearly remembered him, stuck behind a spread newspaper while he and his mother trimmed the tree, and so furious at being roused early on Christmas morning that he'd sat wordless and scowling in his bathrobe and dark tousled hair, while Len had subduedly opened presents chosen by his mother during lunch hours and after work; none by his father, ever. . . .

The familiar wave of despairing fury swamped him, and he let it roll him all the way out of bed, and felt in the dark for the little bottle of yellow pills on the bedside table. Stupid, stupid, to lie there virtually *inviting* the ghost of Christmas Past to drive out sleep. Len was a man nearer fifty than forty, divorced (but successful with women in the short run), with graying hair, a thriving business, books to keep, a store to run. How absurd — how *outrageous* — that such a person should now be doomed to lie in darkness with every muscle clenched, grinding his teeth

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because of what it had been like to receive the information, forty Christmases ago, that his father had not loved him.

ACTUALLY, IT wasn't exactly that his dad hadn't loved him. Len accepted that. But he hadn't *acted* like he did; the truth was, he had acted like he didn't. Len had therefore assumed he didn't. Would a father who loved his son have thrown that son's ice cream cone out of the window of the car because one drop got on the seat? Len had seen that cone, sadly flattened by tires, on his way to and from school for a week. But he had been in the fourth grade the second time that happened; by then he expected it to. His father spanked him, flew out at him, inflicted punishments for mysterious crimes that no one explained. Arnold Flint in his twenties and early thirties had been full of anxiety and insecurity, angry all the time. He had taken this insecurity and anger out on his little boy for the same reason that slaves once took their fury and frustration out on dogs and mules.

Very well; Len understood all that, too. But the coldness and harshness had damaged him, and the damage persisted.

You would never know it was the same child abuser now, though, the handsome white-haired man who hurried out to the car to hug Len and carry in his suitcase. (Had his father ever hugged him when he was little? Len couldn't remember one single time.) Unfairly, age and success had mellowed the old man out of all recognition.

His mother came to the door, and the three of them performed together their ritual dance of unalloyed pleasure at meeting, a piece of playacting that carried them through what remained of the afternoon and halfway through dinner, before Len, as he was bound to do sooner or later, shoved his foot through the paper stage flat of appearances.

It happened that the barbecued chicken, a treat from Len's childhood, was accompanied by peas. Frozen peas. "Whenever did you discover frozen peas, Mom?" (And rushing on without waiting for an answer:) "Remember how you and Dad used to make me sit at this table and eat those ghastly canned peas? And canned *asparagus*? How I hated those asparagus spears, all fibers and mush! It wasn't till I found out about fresh and frozen vegetables that I realized I didn't absolutely loathe peas and asparagus."

His parents stirred uneasily; his father frowned. "No, I don't think I

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remember that," his mother said. "I've been buying Birds Eye for a long time now."

Heart sinking, unable to stop himself, Len barged ahead. "You really don't remember? I don't see how you could forget; it was such a regular event. Dad would sit there scowling" — *like the wrath of God,* he would have said, except that for twenty-five years, none of them had dared mention God to one another — "and shouting, 'THAT'S GOOD FOOD,' and I'd be trying to gag down the wretched three asparagus spears so I could be excused — and, of course, the irony is" — looking now squarely at his father — "it wasn't 'good food' at all."

Mr. Flint had laid down his fork. "What do you mean?"

Len's heart was thumping like a drum. *You could still stop,* he told himself, knowing that he wouldn't. "I mean the nutritional value of canned vegetables is close to zero, and they're full of sodium! And anyway, you weren't exactly forcing me to eat those peas out of concern for my health."

"We were doing the best we knew how to do at the time," his father declared in a loud voice, face and body as tense as Len's own.

"Oh come on, Dad, you know what was going on as well as I do! It was a battle of wills between us, every time. Why deny it?"

Her husband was gathering steam to respond, when Len's mother slipped like a flash through the tiny window of opportunity. "You know, when I was a girl, I always got to put my dinner on my plate one thing at a time. I always just used to hate it when the juice from the peas would run into the potatoes and that kind of thing, and I don't know why; you know how strict Granny could be, but for some reason she always let me get away with. . . ."

His mother prattled on while Len and his father glared at one another. Len could never be sure whether his mother intervened in this fashion to stop a confrontation in its tracks, or whether she would simply dart out of line to drag a conversation into a new course, one more agreeable to herself. Even during perfectly even-tempered discussions between Len and his father, which were developing along in a clear direction, Mrs. Flint was given to pouncing upon some picayune detail and dashing off with it in this way. Len had never known a person as impervious as his mother to the logic of discourse, of the sense of building toward a point — or perhaps what he had never known was a person as quickly bored by discourse on

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any topic that lay outside the scope of her own narrow interests. Certainly she had been infuriating her son (and hurting his feelings) for years by falling sound asleep whenever Len brought slides of his travels or social doings at home and showed them.

His father, by contrast, kept alert throughout the slide shows — asked questions, took quite a keen interest, really, especially in Len's pictures of Europe — but it was his mother Len remembered loving. It was his mother's interest that he wished, and eternally failed, to secure.

"I think I'll take a walk," he said as soon as Mrs. Flint's head of steam began to die down. "If you two don't mind. Not far, just around the neighborhood. I could use some fresh air."

As Len let himself out, he was aware of his father settling down in the big chair with the evening paper.

Why, oh why, would neither of them ever admit they had done anything wrong? Not about the canned peas, necessarily — of course he had put their backs up, bringing the subject up in that way — but *anything!* The biggest concessions Len had ever extracted were two, both from his mother: 1) "We should have let you have a dog" (between the ages of twelve and fifteen, Len had begged desperately for a dog) , and 2) "Everybody makes mistakes" (the implication in context being that they had made an unspecified few with their son). Yet every atom of Len's middle-aged body yearned for those two old people, just once, to say: "Wasn't it ridiculous of us to make such a fuss over three asparagus spears! You never did learn to like the canned ones by being forced to eat them, did you? After a while, I guess we should have let you off." Or, still more gratifying (his father): "I'm so sorry about throwing your ice cream cone out the car window. I can't imagine why I expected a little kid to be able to eat a whole cone in hot weather without dripping; we shouldn't have been in the car at all. I don't know now why we were."

Best of all would be the words Len still longed, but years since had given up hoping, to hear: *You must have felt so bad. It must have hurt you so much. You must have been so scared and bewildered.*

He had been scared and bewildered, all right. There had been far worse punishments than these, shouts and blows descending without warning and for no evident reason on occasions that now seemed countless. He had been spanked for talking to a lady on the streetcar when he was three; for crying after a dentist pulled a molar bloodily without Novocaine at

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five; for sitting with a family friend in church at ten, after a spat with the boy he ordinarily sat with. Well, to be fair, he hadn't actually been spanked that time, but his father had ordered him out of the pew and driven him home, seething beside him in the car. Why?

He knew now, in fact, why his father had done so many things that at the time had been incomprehensible cruelties — but the knowledge brought no relief; it made no difference now.

Nearly as strong as the longing for his grief to be recognized was the longing to be rid of this self-destructive anger; but he continued year after year to struggle helplessly in its grip. If they would only *admit* they'd been wrong, he thought he could stop being angry. But as long as they denied it, he seemed doomed to go on resenting them.

Fists jammed deep in pockets, filled with his stupid rage, Len walked rapidly around and through the maze of oddly foreshortened streets where he had spent the earliest part of his life. Across the decorated square and by back streets toward the elementary school he stalked, from streetlight to streetlight, beneath skeletal maples and beeches whose bare branches shifted vaguely somewhere overhead, between rows of houses each with its Christmas tree and outdoor display, lit and cheerful-looking viewed from without. (Briefly, Len was tempted to prowl across a few lawns and peer through the windows, to see if the scene within was as happy as the outside view seemed to promise. He doubted it very much.)

By contrast, the school was a darkened hulk beside an empty field; Len stood and stared at the building, the goal of his walk, chosen arbitrarily, as if expecting the mute brick to offer a suggestion or a solution. "It wasn't your fault," he told it finally, and turned — a dog on a long leash — to retrace more slowly the route back to his parents' house.

As he swung round, a skinny boy of ten or eleven scrambled up the bank of the schoolyard and ran straight across the trafficless street in front of him. Passing beneath the streetlamp, he turned a white face, blurred and shiny with tears, blindly toward Len. At the sight, a hand of ice closed upon Len's heart. *Christ*, he thought a little wildly, *how many sissified brats am I going to have to trip over on this visit!* It was too much: he had not been able to abide tears in a boy since he had discovered, at the age of nine or so, that it was only girls who were *supposed* to cry over a scraped knee or an injured feeling, that after a certain age, boys were expected to master the impulse. Like any self-respecting boy his age, the

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nine-year-old Len had at once set himself the task of learning to control his tears.

It had been a difficult lesson, for quite a while an impossible one. Len had failed again and again, and despised himself for a sissy. Eventually, though, he had succeeded. Perhaps he had succeeded too well. Several of his women friends had told him as much: "Flint's the right name for you," more than one had declared. Still, these were likely the same women who were so ready to say without embarrassment, "When I saw what she'd done to my hair, I just sat down and cried," or "When they told me I had to have the operation, I guess I must have cried every tear I had in me." Maybe he was too stoical, but he thought they were too soft.

As a small child, Len had cried and cried when his father struck or shouted at him. Then, after a while, he hadn't anymore. It had proved desperately hard, but possible at last, to stop the tears at the source; it had proved easier and easier to substitute rage for heartbreak.

That night, tucked into bed in his old room, Len dreamed of a weeping boy in jeans and a worn white T-shirt and sneakers, sitting on a straight chair within a sealed cube of glass. His sounds of desolation made Len feel desperate; with increasing agitation, he prowled round and round the cube, seeking a way in. But there seemed to be none — no way to reach the child, no way to stop his crying. Len pressed his hands flat against the glass, tried to break it with his fists. No use; his muscles, afflicted with the watery weakness of dreams, could not force a way in. Sealed inside his prison, the boy lifted streaming eyes toward Len's without hope or recognition. He wailed. With all his wasted strength, Len flung his whole body against the barrier — and, in spite of Valium, woke himself up.

He lay in darkness, baffled and appalled at the depth of his distress. After two hours he broke his own firm rule and popped a second tranquilizer.

When he woke again it was Christmas Eve, and it was snowing. "Looks like we'll have a white Christmas," Mrs. Flint said happily at breakfast. "I'm so glad you're not driving down in this today, aren't you?"

Her son, peering through the blear of a Valium hangover, hoped the snow would not delay his departure; but he bundled up after breakfast and drove his mother — who did not drive herself — carefully through the plowed streets to a shopping mall. He felt terrible; it was an effort to chat normally, help decide about last-minute gifts and decorations, even to

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order lunch. The determined cheer of the settings for shopping and eating wore him down; his mother's ceaseless chatter about people named Laverne and Gertrude and Esther, whom Len had never met but had been hearing about for years and years, was always exhausting. Determined as he was not to repeat his father's Scrooge act, it was almost more than he could do to keep his own act up.

Lunch seemed to clear his head a bit. Moved by a sudden generous impulse toward the little old woman across the table, Len roused himself to say, "I've always been grateful that you made Christmas so much fun for me when I was little. Lots of people I know get depressed at Christmastime; but even when Dad was so grouchy and wouldn't join in, you always went to a lot of trouble to make sure I had a nice time anyway."

He expected his mother to be pleased. But Mrs. Flint looked puzzled and shook her head. "I can't understand how anybody could be depressed at Christmastime," she said, for all the world as if her own husband hadn't for the first twenty of their fifty years together been a kind of human monument to seasonal gloom.

Len gave up. Driving home, the car skidded partway into the intersection at a stop sign, alarming them both.

The afternoon dragged. Len leafed through an old family album, looked for a book or a magazine to read, in desperation took a nap. The snow let up around three o'clock, but started again just after dinner. Despite the slippery streets, his parents left around seven for the Candlelight Service at their church; Len had been afraid all afternoon that the weather would put them off, but, luckily for him, his mother badly wanted to go. When they were safely away, he extracted his presents for them both from his suitcase, like a couple of large square teeth, and stuck them under the tree in the living room. Then he poured himself a drink from the bottle cached in the suitcase, and sat in his father's big armchair with his feet on the ottoman, basking in the bliss of having the house to himself.

In years past he had gone with them to the service; he had a good baritone voice and enjoyed singing Christmas carols. But his mother had come to view this as a sign that Len's apostasy was weakening, that he was gradually working up to returning to the Fundamentalist fold. The Christmas he had realized that attending the service fed his mother's unspoken hopes, Len had refused to come with them. Mrs. Flint, terribly disappointed, had pleaded that so many old friends were expecting to

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see him at the service. *"Please,"* she had said again and again, and Len had felt more and more miserable with each refusal; but he'd stuck to his guns, and since then no one had expected him to go.

The house creaked; the tree twinkled and shone, effortlessly dominating the living room. Len sipped his drink and gazed up at the angel chorister on the tree's tip in a kind of weary trance, relaxed and content for the first time since entering the house.

After a bit he became aware of being a little chilly, and was just wondering whether to make an inroad into his parents' store of firewood — or would they enjoy coming home to a fire in the fireplace? — when a man's voice sounded outside, and the slam of a car door. His stomach tensed at once: had they decided after all that the roads were too bad? He downed what was left of his drink in a gulp and went to the front window, which — though mostly filled and blocked by the tree — revealed a car pulled up to the curb and the dim form of a child running up the walk toward the front door. Who in the world could it be? Relieved that in any case it wasn't his parents returning, and that he needn't get rid of his glass, Len walked the length of the room, switched on the porch light, and pulled the door open.

But nobody was there — no car at the curb, no child on the stoop. Nothing. He opened the storm door and stepped outside to peer up and down the quiet, snowy street: nothing.

Len came slowly back inside and shut the door against the cold. After a moment's hesitation, he turned the lock. Then he went to look through the window again, but now that view was as empty as the view from the door.

Len shrugged. He snapped the remote control loose from the TV set and, throwing himself back into his chair, clicked it on. And at once smiled in pleased surprise; for the Christmas service from King's College Chapel in Cambridge, England, was just beginning on the PBS channel. Len had made a mental note to try to catch the program, but had forgotten all about it. Now, by good luck, he had caught it after all. As a child, Len had sung in a very good boys' choir himself for the four years before his voice changed, and ever since had tried to hear the Vienna Boys' Choir and others in concert when he could. The King's College Choir used music students for the tenor and bass parts, but the trebles and altos were boys trained in a special choir school in Cambridge, and they were superb. Len

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poured himself another drink and settled down to enjoy the program.

The concert had only just begun; the robed choristers, singing like angels, were still filing into the chapel. The processional, as always, was "Once In Royal David's City," and the choir had reached the third or fourth of its innumerable stanzas:

. . . Christian children all should be
Mild, obedient, good as He.

For He is our childhood's pattern:
Day by day, like us He grew;
He was little, meek, and helpless,
Tears and smiles like us He knew. . . .

The music was splendid; but, really listening to the words for once, Len found himself distracted and annoyed. What a load of Victorian claptrap! What was the use of telling a child to be mild, obedient, good? Len felt he had been far too "good" himself. He should have resisted more, fought back, not been such a sissy; he should have made the old man think twice before starting in on him. Len could imagine Joseph coming home after a stressful day of carpentry and whaling the living daylights out of the boy Jesus — that's what mildness and obedience got you. Could Mary have intervened? Not bloody likely. Joseph would have gotten away with it; Mary was only a woman, and Jesus was little, meek, and helpless. Aren't we all.

The choir had finished the carol and settled into its stalls before Len was able to let go of this line of thought, and some bigwig from the college was reading the first lesson. When he was done, the choir stood again. *Knock it off now,* Len told himself; *stop carping and picking and ruining it for yourself; just enjoy the music. You're doing it only because you're in this house.*

Now, on the screen, a beautiful blond choirboy of perhaps nine stepped forward and began his solo. Gradually, Len relaxed again; the carol was one of his favorites, and he relished the perfect enunciation and precision of the chorister in his scarlet robe and white surplice, pointing to each note as he sang it:

* * *

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In the bleak midwinter
Frosty winds made moan.
Earth stood hard as iron,
Water like a stone.
Snow was falling, snow on snow,
Snow . . . on . . . snow,
In the bleak midwinter
Long . . . ago.

A SOUND MADE Len turn his head. Pressed against the cold picture window behind the tree were two small, bare palms, and between them a child's face streaked with tears.

Heart in his throat, Len sprang out of his chair and charged outside. There was no child at the window when he reached it. He came back in, put on his coat and boots, and walked methodically around the entire house; but there was nothing to see. Struck by a thought, he went back to the front window. No footprints but his own large ones marked the snow below it.

What the hell was going on? The child from the car had to be the one at the window, but where had the damn kid gone? Could the falling snow have already covered tracks so new? His own footprints leading from the stoop to the window, made when he had first seen the face and dashed outside, were already blurring but still perfectly plain. He shivered violently, a little angry and completely baffled.

Neither were there any tracks between the curb and the house; the inch of fluffy snow fallen since dinnertime on the front walk his father had shoveled that afternoon stretched unsullied to the sidewalk. His parents had left the house through the garage door, but the boy he had seen running from the car toward the door should have left prints on the walk.

Len made himself go out to the curb. Overlapping wheel tracks were plain in the middle of the street, but there were no marks to show where a car had pulled over and stopped.

But he had seen the car, and twice seen the boy.

Without warning, Len was scared out of his wits. At once the old outgrown self-loathing seized him: *Get hold of yourself! It's the booze on top of all that Valium; what else could it be? Don't be a goddamn fool.* Back inside he prowled up and down the living room between the tree and the

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shrilling of the choir. When the superstitious fear did not diminish, he pulled his wet boots back on — he had not removed his coat — and flung out of the house.

He strode off at a tremendous pace, despite the slippery sidewalks and the intermittent darkness. A little fresh air must surely be a better antidote for Christmas madness than that house of stifling memories! A couple of turns around the Square, to get his blood well up, then back. His parents would be home before long; he actually felt eager to see them, and was not so far gone as to be unable to appreciate the irony of this.

He was crossing the Square when his heel slipped on a patch of ice and he fell heavily, splat, on one hip. There was no traffic; no one saw him fall. In a moment he got his breath back and pushed himself to his feet.

As he rose, his hand in its thick ragg glove grazed something flat and triangular seemingly embedded in the concrete scraped bare by the plows, then dusted over thickly by new snow. Not thinking, Len brushed the snow away. The Square was well-lit; the thing was plainly an ice cream cone that had been mashed flat by the wheels of cars passing over it. A waffle cone, yellow and faintly ridged.

It had been a vanilla cone. Len's chest filled up with terror. "I don't want to, I don't want to!" he gasped aloud, frantically beating the snow from his coat and pants. "Leave me alone!" He kicked savagely at the remains of the cone, but there was nothing his boot could do to it after what the cars had done.

Len's parents came in shortly after he had gimped back to the house he had left unlocked and turned off the TV. Ashamed of his deep relief, Len listened with unfeigned patience to his mother's description of the service and her rehearsal of Gertrude's illness and Laverne's problems with a wayward child. When bedtime came, he took two Valiums straightaway, and fell asleep plotting his escape.

Singing woke him.

It was still dark. The luminous digital clock on the bedside table said 3:14. For a moment Len lay confused, while the sweet voices soared outside the window:

Jesus, our brother, kind and good,
Was humbly born in a stable rude,

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And the friendly beasts around Him stood —
Jesus, our brother, kind and good.

Len had not heard that carol since he had sung it himself in the Junior Sunday School Christmas program, when he was perhaps seven. He'd sung the verse about the cow. It had been his first solo. He remembered singing the cow verse quietly to himself on the bus coming home from rehearsal. His father had made him stop, in case he might be bothering the other passengers.

I, said the donkey, shaggy and brown,
I carried his mother uphill and down,
I carried his mother to Bethlehem Town,
I, said the donkey, shaggy and brown.

He knew he would have to get up out of bed and go to the window, and finally he did. It had stopped snowing. Outside on the white lawn stood a little group of carolers. The smallest was just finishing the stanza about the donkey. A slightly older boy took up the next:

I, said the cow, all white and red,
I gave him my manger for his bed,
I gave him my hay to pillow his head. . . .

Shaking like an aspen leaf, Len stared down at the four children in the snow. Somebody else might have noted a strong family resemblance among them; Len saw there was more to it than that. He recognized these faces — had *seen* them without knowing it, in and out of the old album he'd been looking at the day before: the smallest boy, who was perhaps five; the one who had sung the cow stanza, about seven; the one now singing, "I, said the sheep with the curly horn," who might have been nine; and the tallest and thinnest, waiting to do, "I, said the dove from the rafters high," who was ten. He knew them all, at last. They were himself. The child in the Holiday Inn, the child at the schoolyard, the child running toward the house, and the face at the window — all himself. Until now he had looked at none of them, only at their tears.

With the shock of this certainty Len surrendered, ceased trying to

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make sense of it. He struggled to open the window, somehow knowing that this would not be allowed. Failing, he leaned his forehead against the icy glass while the carolers began the first stanza over again.

The four boys he had been stood straight in their thin T-shirts and faded jeans, coatless in the cold. They looked neither at Len nor at one another, but sang with all the seriousness of King's College choristers in concert. They were not transparent, but where they stood, the deep snow lay undented.

My childhood home is haunted by my childhood, Len thought from a place beyond terror; *no wonder I scare myself to death!*

Now the sweet melody became shaded with grief, as tears began to slide glittering down the singers' faces. Len's own eyes ached; his throat cramped. If he woke the two old people now and led them to the window, would they at last see, and recognize, the figures below? Or would they say, as they had in effect said through all the years, *No, no, there's nothing there!*

For a wild moment, he was possessed by a need to gather these sad children — himself — clumsily into his own arms, give them what little he had of warmth and comfort; at the same time, he knew they were beyond his or anyone's reach forever. He could literally do nothing in the world for the weeping singers now but feel for them.

It was the last thing in the world he wanted, to feel those feelings ever again, when feeling them had once been so pure a torment that, for the best part of forty years, they had been sealed from sight, disguised as rage, avoided as he avoided his father's house. What good would it do those little boys, eternally lost beyond reach of consolation, for him to feel them now?

At once the answer came: *Not them, but you.*

Then the carol ended, and the four were no longer there.

Len stood at the window, shaking still with cold and a complicated fear. "I don't *want* to," he said aloud again. But the ache in his chest and throat was irresistible; his sinuses burned unbearably; there appeared to be nothing else to do about what he had been shown but to let it burst out of him, or —

Or what?

Or forfeit all hope of redemption.

It pushed at him, insistent. With stiff fingers, hurrying finally, Len

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pulled on robe and socks and slippers and felt his way down the hall to the living room. Groping about, he found the end of the cord and plugged in the tree. He found a box of Kleenex, and placed a chair from the dining room set against the wall beside the cold fireplace. He sat down. *All right, I will,* he said. *I will.*

And let it happen.

Common Ground

You sip your tea from a glazed pottery mug.
Steam ripples across your face like an emotion.
You ask why mine are masked behind my labels,
my quantifications and denials of the heart.
I'm an amateur scientist, I say in firm tones,
as if that exempts me from having to feel.
I need hard copy, something to download
or digest until a kernal of truth shines through.
You laugh, calling my arguments circuitous,
saying it's all in there, my anger and my joy.
You offer the enigma of a home-baked bagel;
crumbs dust my dark beard like shattered equations.
I offer a clinical explanation for yeast and gases;
you bubble about me, catch my face in your hands.
My light bends toward yours, we spin like double stars
caught in the gravity of our embrace.

— ROBERT FRAZIER

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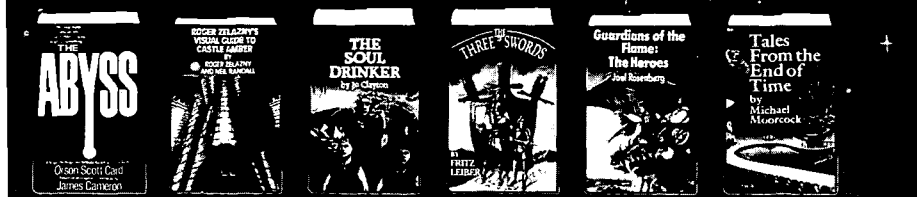

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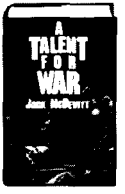

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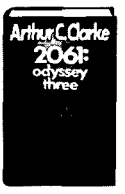

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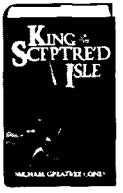

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